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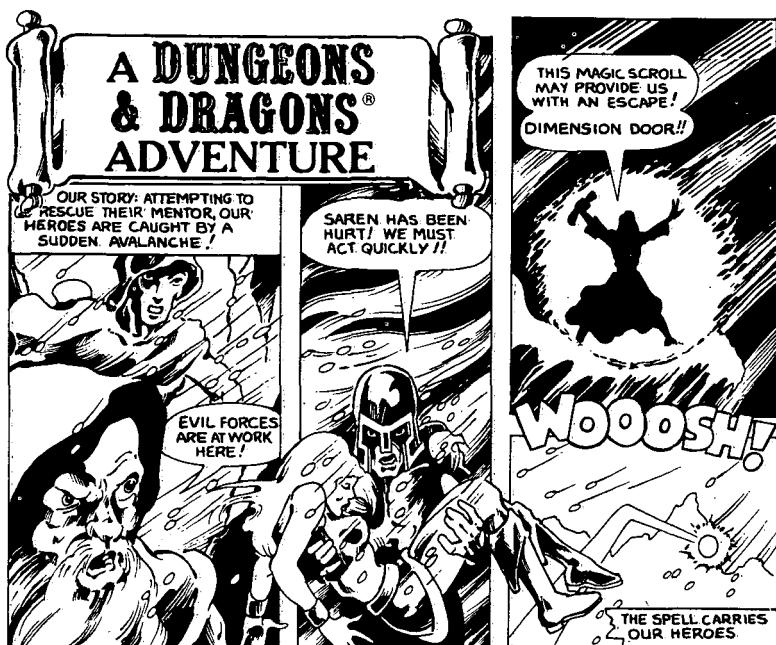
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Gregory Benford  
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# opinion

by Robert Silverberg

The true space age forecast by science fiction — the one that Heinlein and Jack Williamson and a lot of other far-sighted people were writing about forty and fifty years ago — may finally have gotten itself under way in Texas on September 9, 1982. That was the day when a small outfit named Space Services, Inc., of America succeeded in launching a spaceship called the *Conestoga 1*, which carried a payload of 40 gallons of water.

The *Conestoga 1*'s maiden voyage wasn't very much more impressive than its payload. It took off from Matagorda Island on the Gulf of Mexico at 10:17 A.M., zoomed spaceward to a height of 195.9 miles, and splashed into the Gulf after a 321-mile flight that lasted ten and a half minutes. That's all. It's more or less a Tinkertoy kind of achievement. But the significant thing is that it was the first flight in history by a private-enterprise space vehicle.

Which brings us smack into the era of Heinlein's Delos D. Harriman — he's the man who sold the Moon, remember — and Jack Williamson's asteroid miners, and all the other bold and reckless entrepreneurs of the space age that

some of us were reading about in the pulp magazines of an earlier day. Circa 1942, the spaceships were *always* built by private companies (either run on a shoe-string out of the inventor's back yard, or else by large corporations on the order of General Motors); and the mining-and-shipping activities out there in the wild and woolly deep yonder were not tremendously different from what was going on in the United States during the freebooting nineteenth-century days of Vanderbilt and Jay Gould and John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil.

When real space-voyaging began a quarter of a century ago, though, it wasn't much like anything the science-fiction writers had envisioned. Private corporations were involved, yes — but only as subcontractors to the vast government programs that were running the show. Space became a quasi-military operation in the United States, and a purely military one in the Soviet Union, and the few other countries that have mounted any sort of a space program have done it in an entirely government-run manner. Even though some commercialization of



space has begun — mostly in the form of communications satellites — everything is closely controlled by government agencies, and the rockets that put those satellites into orbit are government-made models.

But now the free-enterprise buccaneers of space have made their entry on the scene. Space Services, Inc., a Houston-based company of very small size indeed, managed to scrape together \$6 million to buy an antique Minuteman rocket from NASA (cost: \$365,000), build a gasoline-generator-powered command center on a cattle ranch, and — after some initial glitches — get its half-ton payload lofted into space behind 50,000 pounds of thrust. It sounds mighty dinky, yes. But a real astronaut was the director of the mission — Donald K. Slayton, who indeed has been Out There himself — and Space Services, Inc., has very real plans for its conquest of the next frontier. According to David Hannah, Jr., the chairman of the company, 1984 will see the orbiting of the first privately launched satellite, with its capacity sold to oil companies in need of satellite tracking and communication. After that, by 1985 or 1986, monthly launchings may be scheduled.

"We feel we can offer a service that NASA cannot," David Hannah told the press. "We can give a quicker response time. If a customer has a specific payload, we can respond."

Perhaps so. Perhaps Space Services, Inc., will expand into a corporate titan of the twenty-first

century, the kind we've been reading about in all those gaudy paperback novels. (Space opera about free-enterprise activity in the asteroid belts has had a resurgence of popularity in recent years.) Or possibly the little company will fizzle on the launching pad, and someone else will reap the rewards that await tomorrow's spacemen.

Win or lose, though, Hannah and his company have done something of immense symbolic power. They've taken real steps toward getting space out of the hands of the bureaucrats and into the domain of the real risk-takers. At a time when the exploration of space by mankind seems virtually to have been aborted — remember, we got astronauts to the Moon *thirteen years ago*, but who's been there lately? — I think that's worthy of some applause.

My own bias, of course, is in favor of private enterprise. Only a national superpower could have mustered the resources, as it turned out, to make possible the first space voyages; but now that that phase of the job is done, I'd like to see faster and more imaginative development of that new frontier than governments are willing to provide.

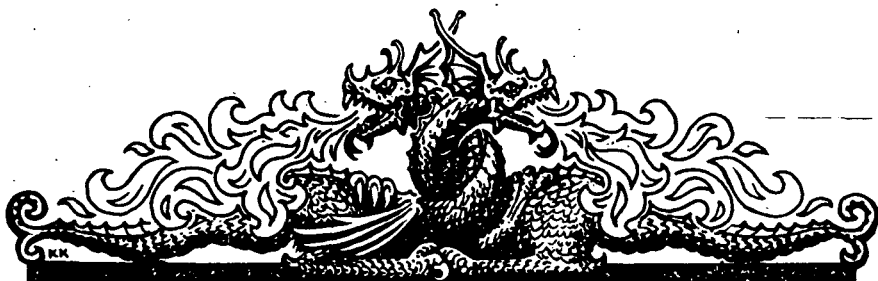
There are risks, of course. I don't particularly relish the idea of repeating the horrendous *laissez-faire* deeds of the nineteenth-century robber barons. I'm not eager for the strip-mining of Mars, or the orbiting of gigantic advertising billboards, or the staking out of claims to the moons of Jupiter on

a keep-away-this-is-ours basis. Since I see no effective way to prevent any of that from happening by governmental action (the United Nations Space Police, I imagine, would be just about as potent as most United Nations peacekeeping forces have been on Earth), we'll probably have to trust to luck, the wisdom of the corporate barons, and the power of public opinion to keep the new breed of space pioneers from befouling the rest of the Solar System in the quest for profit.

But the Solar System is pretty big, and can take a lot of befouling at our hands before it's going to

show; and maybe we've learned a lesson or two since 1875, though I wouldn't place large bets on it. Still, given a choice between rapacious Interplanet, Ltd., and a sleepy, cautious government-run space operation, I think I'll opt for the buccaneers. At least they'll go out there and see what's there for the looting.

One feeble old rocket making a 10-minute flight, naturally, is but the merest of beginnings. Nevertheless, one raucous cheer from this corner for the profit motive. It may get us to the Great Andromeda Nebula yet — or at least as far as the black pits of Luna. ☾



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## BOOK REVIEWS

by Frank Catalano

One of the great, awful feelings a writer can experience comes when finding out the science in a science-fiction story has turned out dead wrong, thus killing any chance at continued credibility for the work.

In re-reading Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, you get the impression Clarke did a damn good job of "predicting" the future from his 1968 viewpoint. You have the spacecraft which, like the space shuttle, has a lower stage that drops off and glides back to Earth, while the upper stage goes on to orbit after firing its own engines. You have the flat newspads, precursors of teletext, that allow Clarke's characters to punch up newspapers transmitted through "news satellites." And this was 15 years ago ... a year before Man first landed on the Moon.

Clarke had his share of misses, too. It now looks like the first space station won't be that wonderfully romantic rotating wheel, but oversized shuttle-transported beer cans attached in orbit.

Overall, though, *2001* holds up well — right down to the description of Iapetus, the moon of Saturn that Voyager 2 confirmed was much brighter on one side than the other, and the location where the climactic scene in *2001* takes place between the astronaut and the monolith. Other writers of science fiction should have it so good.

### **2010: Odyssey Two**

by Arthur C. Clarke

Del Rey: \$14.95 (cloth)

While Clarke's original tale holds up nicely, you don't have to read it to enjoy the sequel, *2010*. As a matter of fact, you might be better off seeing the

movie of the same name one more time.

The novel doesn't follow the movie. In *2001-the-book*, for example, astronaut David Bowman's mission ends near Saturn, while in the movie, that happens near Jupiter. In both, Man discovers the mysterious black monolith on the Moon; the computer HAL goes berserk; and in his search for the meaning of the monolith, Bowman is transformed into the Star-Child.

But Clarke points out in the introduction to *2001* that he decided to pick up the narrative from the point where the film ended. That's understandable, since a lot more people probably saw the movie than read the book.

In *2010*, the lead character is Dr. Heywood Floyd, the man who oversaw the politics in the exploration of the original Moon monolith in *2001*. Here, the book begins with Floyd and other scientists from various countries talking about getting to Bowman's spacecraft and salvaging it for its knowledge, as well as finding out what happened to Bowman. On the way, we find out why HAL went berserk, what a Star-Child is, and who made the monoliths.

Answering those questions alone would be worth the price of the novel; but Clarke also throws in a nice plot device after the loose ends are tied up, something that keeps you turning the pages and takes the monolith affair to a fascinating conclusion.

Like the best of Clarke, *2010* is easy reading and the science doesn't get overly technical. It's even possible to follow the plot without knowing the original book or movie: Clarke incorporates the background from *2001*, often in the same words, into *2010* in condensed form. But no matter how

you prepare for it, *2010* is a worthy successor to *2001*.

### **The Nonborn King**

by Julian May

Houghton-Mifflin: \$16.95 (cloth)

Unlike *2010*, *The Nonborn King* is not a sequel but one of a series. In this case, the series is *THE SAGA OF THE PLIOCENE EXILE*, which traces the progress of a group of time-travellers through Pliocene Europe. They are the people who couldn't fit into the new world formed when alien races intervened in Earthly affairs, so they made the six-million-year, one-way trip to escape the Galactic Milieu and its powerful psychics. What they found, though, were two warring races: the Tanu and Firvalug, on the other side of the time-gate — who also had strong psychic powers.

*The Nonborn King* is the third book in the series, preceded by *The Many-Colored Land* and *The Golden Torc*; and the new entry is much livelier and faster-paced than *Torc*, as well as more labyrinthine in plot structure than either of the previous books.

It begins by introducing a faction only hinted at before: the remnants of the leadership of the Metapsychic Rebellion, who wanted to take over the Milieu for humanity and instead wound up running through the time-gate when their Rebellion collapsed.

In addition, you've got all the changes and personalities from the other two books to deal with. I pride myself on having a good memory, but the detailed synopsis at the start of the book is vital to keeping the players straight. May has created a story thick and rich with politics, with every faction against every other faction. It is so complex a plot, it's hard to keep track of who's doing what to whom in each section; and per-

haps owing to that complexity it's difficult to feel much for the major characters who are killed off in this volume.

But where the weaving of the plot threads could have frazzled, May has done an excellent job of holding them together. She's a skilled technician. Every cliffhanger is where it should be. You may not know what's coming, but you do know something extraordinary is around the bend.

*The Nonborn King* narrows the series' issues by its close, a satisfying climactic scene that nicely sets the stage for the fourth novel in the Pliocene quartet, *The Adversary*. If you enjoyed *The Many-Colored Land*, *The Nonborn King* shouldn't disappoint you.

### **Light on the Sound**

by Somtow Sucharitkul

Timescape: \$2.95 (paper)

A series book that does disappoint is Sucharitkul's *Light on the Sound*. As with so much of his work, he throws a lot of flashy ideas at the reader, but fails to back them up with substance.

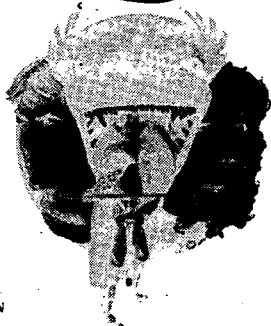
This time the flashy ideas are part of Sucharitkul's Inquestor universe. The Inquest has a habit of looking for so-called perfect worlds, and then destroying the societies through their flaws. The concept is a fascinating one: that change and chaos are necessary to hone the human mind. But there's no real passion here. The characters speak ill-fitting lines and push the plot around.

Sucharitkul peppers the book with such technical-sounding words as servocorpse, thinkhive, shimmercloak, hoverthrone, and more until it gets to be so much Hollywood tinsel, obscuring the object it's meant to decorate. *Light on the Sound* may be the first book in a trilogy, but as a first course, it's like cotton candy — fascinating, but ultimately unsatisfying.

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## Eye of Cat

by Roger Zelazny

Timescape: \$13.95 (cloth)

All of Roger Zelazny's best works have the word "of" in the title.

Consider it: *Lord of Light*; *Isle of the Dead*; and now, *Eye of Cat*.

*Eye of Cat* is the best thing Zelazny has written in years. It's smooth entertainment and at the same time is deep and thoughtful. William Blackhorse Singer is a 170-year-old Navajo, the last of his clan. He's also known as the Star Tracker, now retired, a man who single-handedly nearly filled the Interstellar Life Institute. But after capturing all of those alien lifeforms, only one really bothers him, the shape-shifter he knows as Cat. Was it really an animal, or sentient?

The novel begins with Singer being pulled out of retirement to stop the assassination of an emissary from another planet. However, that aspect of the story is rapidly resolved; and the plot then turns to one of Singer and Cat as rivals for Singer's life.

The novel really is about belonging. Singer went from being an Indian medicine-man to living in a high-tech society, and never completely adapted. Through flashbacks, some poetry, and digressions into Navajo lore, Zelazny adds depth to the story and illuminates parts of Singer's dilemma.

Now that I've praised the book, some bitching: the ending is confusing. As with some of his other best work, *Eye of Cat* is haunted by an obscure ending, one that tries so hard to be philosophically significant it comes out convoluted, so you don't really know what happened in a climactic scene. I tried puzzling it out from several angles, but with no success. If indeed Zelazny doesn't want the reader to figure it out, then the book fails as SF and becomes some sort of philosophy/fantasy hybrid.

No matter: It's still the best Zelazny in a long time, with even a typical quirky Zelazny image in the final scene that brings it all back to Earth. *Eye of Cat* is worth reading, and re-reading.

## The God Project

by John Saul

Bantam: \$15.95 (cloth)

I almost hesitate to bring *The God Project* up. It's not billed as science-fiction. Or fantasy. It is of a breed of novel those in the publishing industry call the techno-thriller, something the rest of us would have called near-future SF a decade ago.

*The God Project*, like the techno-thrillers *Coma*, *The Terminal Man*, and others before it, is distinguished by contemporary characters in contemporary settings with some sort of scientific gimmick, usually from medical science, and usually evil. In the case of *The God Project*, the gimmick is genetic engineering; specifically, how a group of unscrupulous scientists are trying to breed very healthy kids and blaming the failures on Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

Saul relies on stock characters — the anguished mother, the cold-blooded research scientist, and the uncertain administrator — to get his point across, portraits so familiar it's hard to feel for them as human beings. And the book's epilogue is a masterpiece of anti-science paranoia. The novel ends in such a way that it makes you want to throw it through a window.

*The God Project* — and so many novels like it — label technologies, and not people, as the villains. That's the kind of simple-mindedness SF was crawling up out of decades ago. Unfortunately, a lot of people may read this or similar novels and get the idea that *this* is what science fiction, is all about.

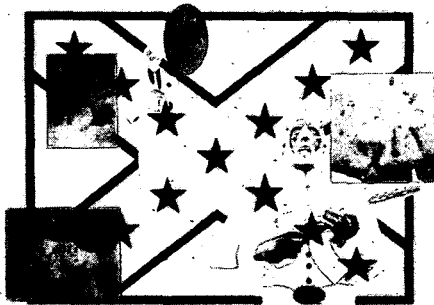
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## **The Judas Mandala**

by Damien Broderick

Timescape: \$2.50 (paper)

*The Judas Mandala* is a time-travel novel with the main narratives running in 1999 and 6031, and it's so self-consciously intellectual that I was sure I would hate it before I finished it.

It's the traditional battle of spontaneity versus predictability, with the lead character of Maggie Roche caught in all of it, recruited by the folks in 6031 to help them out. The plot is incredibly complex, but does tie together. Just be prepared to do a lot of careful puzzling out.

The book's biggest flaw is in the pseudo-philosophy that the characters spew and the gobbledegook scientific explanation that really isn't needed. And like Saul with *The God Project*, Broderick would have done the reader a great favor by throwing the last chapter out the window — it makes things a bit more confusing than they need to be. But the book does go somewhere . . . and I even believe that I liked it.

## **Worlds of George O.**

By George O. Smith

Bantam: \$2.50 (paper)

Finally, *Worlds of George O.* is a pleasant collection of not just entertaining stories, but of glances back at the field of SF as seen by the late George O. Smith shortly before his death. The ten stories span more than two decades, and each is prefaced with a fascinating, if sometime rambling, introduction by Smith.

Some of the stories' endings may seem convoluted and the characters hard to believe, but it's still enjoyable. There's even the radio script for "Meddler's Moon" and an alternate — and much better — ending to "Understanding."

*Worlds of George O.* is both a collection of some worthwhile stories and a brief, revealing look at the life of those writing science-fiction during its Golden Age.

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by Robert Coulson

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## **Foundation's Edge**

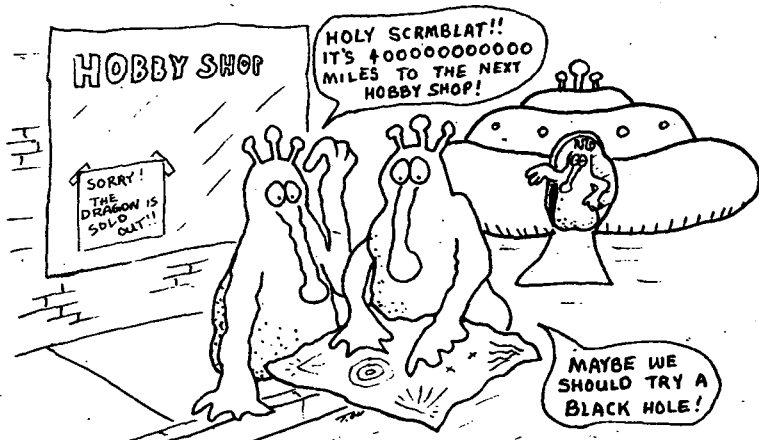
by Isaac Asimov

Doubleday \$14.95 (cloth)

In 1966, Asimov's *FOUNDATION SERIES* was given a Hugo Award as the "Best All-Time Series" in science fiction history. Now, almost 30 years after the initial series was concluded, Asimov has produced a fourth book; to say it has been "long-awaited" is an understatement. Personally, I didn't think the original series was the best of all time, and I don't think this volume is the best of its year. But it is quite

good, and just as entertaining as were the first three Foundation books. It is a nice straightforward adventure/intrigue novel, with none of the in-depth characterization (and none of the neurotic characters) that most modern authors consider essential. I was tempted to review it in one sentence: "If the Second Foundation was designed to watch over and guide the First Foundation, then who watches over the Second Foundation?" (But writers who get paid by the word seldom do things like that.) At the start of this novel, several

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characters discover that someone or some group has been manipulating Foundation programs — not to disrupt them but to make them adhere more closely to Seldon's Plan. And, of course, they go off looking for the manipulators. It's a wheels-within-wheels sort of story, with everyone trying to manipulate everyone else for the good of the Plan, and eventually there is the confrontation and the course of the Galaxy is decided for the next few hundred years. The book is not precisely sparkling with brilliance, but it's a nice solid piece of craftsmanship; I enjoyed it while I was reading it. For anyone who still hasn't had enough of the Foundation, there is a nice big opening for a sequel presented on the last page; this may well be the first volume of a second trilogy.

### **Psion**

by Joan D. Vinge  
Delacorte Press \$11.95  
(trade paperback)

The problems of psi powers co-existing with "normal" humanity. Vinge's Galaxy-wide society has the same problems with intolerance that ours does. Her plot is reminiscent of an Andre Norton novel: the teen-ager from the slums whose discovery of his psi powers involves him in various plots and assorted shows of intolerance. (I was also reminded of a series of stories Henry Kuttner did in the 1940s about mutant "Baldies".) But it's what an author does with a plot that counts, and Vinge's characterization and backgrounds are all her own. Cat is much more of a realistic slum kid than earlier authors would have been allowed to depict even if they'd wanted to. He's more squeamish about killing than his current counterpart would be, but then telepathy would make a difference in that sphere for anyone but a psycho-

path. The villain of the piece is a psychopath, but he also has a just grievance; enough so that some readers may hope that he'll win. In fact, he should win; the foiling of the plot is the weakest part of the book. Still, it's acceptable; Vinge didn't quite write herself into a corner. This is totally different from Vinge's award-winning *The Snow Queen*, but in some ways it's a better book; less ambitious but better realized. A good solid effort.

### **The Darkling**

by David Kesterton  
Arkham House \$12.95 (cloth)

A much sloppier publication than I expect from Arkham House. At a guess, I'd say the original manuscript began with a dream sequence, which was removed at some point. However, references to it remain, so the first half-dozen pages are much less coherent than they should be. There are other, more minor, examples of the same sort of thing throughout the book. They could all be the author's fault, but they look much more like inept editing. Other items, such as a member of a savage tribe who refers to microorganisms, can be laid at the author's door, along with phrases such as "an azure tint on the eastern rim assured him that dawn would soon limn the horizon with roseate hues." If you can struggle through the first sixty pages, the book picks up momentum and becomes a fair (but never a good) "quest" novel, with an interesting assortment of weird fauna. But none of the characters ever seem like real people. The author has given each of them a bundle of characteristics as a *leitmotif*, but they remain puppets moving at his whim.

### **The Orphan**

by Robert Stallman  
Pocket Books \$2.25 (paper)



## **The Captive**

by Robert Stallman

Timescape \$2.50 (paper)

## **The Beast**

by Robert Stallman

Timescape \$2.50 (paper)

Together, these three books comprise *THE BOOK OF THE BEAST*, which details the infancy, adolescence, and maturity of an alien creature growing up in the United States of the 1930s. This sort of serial novel is becoming more popular with publishers, but still gets short shrift when the awards and reviews appear. It's a case of the whole being greater than the parts; the individual books are not really complete novels and thus are hard to judge, and since each of these books was published in a different year, the novel as a whole is ineligible for an award. It's also difficult for the average newsstand browser to acquire the complete story; I hope the publisher reprints this as a boxed or matched set, now that it's complete. *The Beast* is a fascinating critter. Even as an infant it has intelligence at least equal to a human teen-ager's, plus several senses humans don't have, plus the ability to somehow summon up and change into a human persona. Not a werewolf; the human part of the combination is somewhat independent and able to argue with and sometimes control the *Beast* part. Neither are the humans a trick of the eye or phantoms; they're "real" enough that one marries and fathers a child. *The Beast* isn't malevolent, but it lacks experience as does any child, and it does have the will to live, in an era when strange-looking animals were more likely to be shot than studied. While it's quite willing to help the family with which it resides, its ideas of help aren't always what the humans want. What *The Beast* wants isn't revealed until the climax. Since it

has grown up isolated from its own kind, even it doesn't know what its maturity will be like. Stallman has done his research on the Depression Era and the southwestern Indians. If a few of the details are off — I certainly don't recall any era in which the State Line Taverns were on the Indiana side of the border, Indiana being notoriously backward in this respect — the overall background is impressively authentic. Highly recommended, but you *must* get the earlier books and read the story in order.

## **Science Fiction & Fantasy Awards**

edited by R. Reginald

Borgo Press \$2.95 (paper)

This differs from the awards book reviewed last time in that Devore and Franson provided coverage in depth of three major awards, while Reginald records twenty-three different science fiction and fantasy awards, including some from England, continental Europe, and Australia. However, only the winners are listed; nominees are not. The name of the awarding group is listed but no other background information is given. He does cover a lot of ground; several of the awards here are ones I'd never heard of before. (He omits the "Jules Verne Award", but that was more of a Ray Palmer publicity gimmick than a genuine award.) In addition, there is a list of the World Science Fiction Conventions through 1981, and a list of the officers of the Science Fiction Writers of America through the 1981-82 year.

## **The Feminine Eye**

edited by Tom Staicar

Frederick Ungar \$6.95 (paper)

A collection of articles on women science fiction writers. Much of it, inevitably, concerns feminism; feminism is "in" in science fictional/academic

circles. Now, I know a good many of science fiction's feminists personally and like most of them (I shall avoid saying that "some of my best friends are feminists"), but I do get tired of all the discussion of it. A writer either produces good stories, or doesn't. Whether those stories follow the party line or not may be an interesting sidelight but should not be the entire discussion. In addition to the feminism, this book has a fine tribute to Leigh Brackett by Rosemarie Arbur, a critique of the themes of C.L. Moore's work by Pat Mathews, a list of Andre Norton's accomplishments by Roger Schlobin, an analysis of alienation in the works of Joan Vinge by Carl Yoke, and an excellent essay on Marion Bradley's recurrent theme of freedom and the price one must pay for it, by Susan Schwartz. In the sex and feminist line, we have Mary Brizzi discussing C.J. Cherryh, Adam Frisch on James Tiptree, Jr., Marleen Barr writing about Suzy McKee Charnas, and Edgar Chapman on Suzette Haden Elgin. Worth getting for the Arbur, Mathews, and Schwartz articles; the rest are informative in spots; and in my jaundiced opinion an academic book that's halfway good is a bargain.

### **Fantasy Voices 1**

edited by Jeffrey M. Elliot

### **Science Fiction Voices #5**

edited by Darrell Schweitzer

Borgo Press \$2.95 each (paper)

These are books of interviews with assorted authors. Elliot interviews Manly Wade Wellman, John Norman, Hugh B. Cave, and Katherine Kurtz, while in the same length book, Schweitzer interviews Isaac Asimov, Lin Carter, Leigh Brackett and Edmond Hamilton, Lester del Rey, Frank Belknap Long, Clifford D. Simak, Wilson Tucker, and Jack Williamson. Obviously Elliot's interviews go into

more detail, but Schweitzer's best can be equally interesting. There doesn't seem to be much correlation between the status of the author and the quality of the interview. In my opinion, the best interviews are of Wellman, del Rey, Cave, and Carter; I enjoy the fiction of the first two and avoid the fiction of the last two. Cave in particular is fascinating. A word of caution: many people seem to like interviews because they believe they're getting the real lowdown on the author's beliefs. No. What you get is what the authors are willing to say for public consumption. It may well precisely reflect their innermost thoughts — and it may not. In these volumes they provide comments on their own and others' work, how they go about writing, some glimpses into their personal lives, and the older authors provide a few glimpses into what professional writing was like when they began back in the 1930s. I've never been fond of reading interviews, but these held my interest very well. I think a full-length autobiography by Hugh B. Cave might well be more entertaining than the horror-fantasy novels he writes.

### **Crystal Singer**

by Cynthia McQuillin

### **Skybound**

by Leslie Fish

### **Juanita Coulson Live**

**At Filkcon West**

by Juanita Coulson

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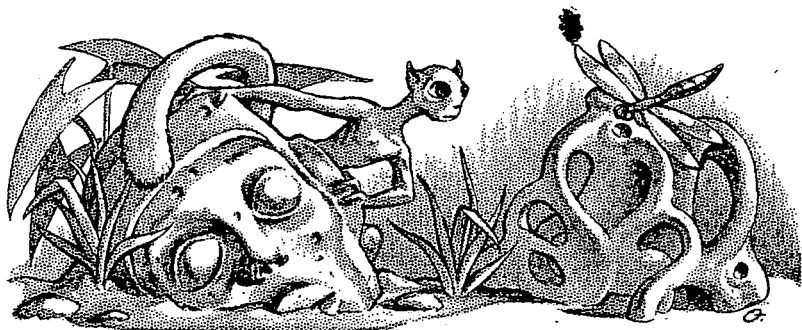
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\$8.00 each (tape)

Filksinging has had a long and involved history in science fiction. Basically, it consists of writing and/or performing science-fiction and/or fantasy songs. Until recently it, like its parent folksinging, has been almost entirely

"in the oral tradition." Or aural tradition, if you prefer. Now, Off Centaur has begun producing 60-minute cassette tapes, both of specific singers and of specific "sings." As I write, they are at work on a tape of "The Best of Chicon IV" and on another tape of songs relating to the Dorsai stories of Gordon Dickson. Filk can be, as in the Dorsai songs, connected to one specific book or series, or it can be a plea for the space program or a ballad with its own science-fictional or fantastic plot or it can be a humorous jibe at the field in general. Singers can be good, bad, or indifferent. I consider the three listed to be among the best of Off Centaur's

dozen or so tapes to date, though I admit to possible prejudice in one case. If you're at all interested in musical versions of science fiction, try one of these or write for Off Centaur's catalog and pick another title that sounds more interesting. I'm not much of a music critic (I know what I like), but I can at least attest that production values are fully professional in all respects, and while the singers were amateurs before getting paid for these recordings, they were excellent amateurs. And if you want more information about filking, write to me in care of this magazine. ♪



## LEGEND'S END

We simply come from different stories:  
You pursuing a holy grail  
As I wait for a kiss to wake me.  
I sleep while the need to touch you grows  
And quests, I hear, are lonely.

— Wendy McElroy

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## IMPROBABLE BESTIARY: THE TROLL

In a puddlesome bog, in a muddleglum hole  
Full of brackenous blög lived a wartyish Troll,  
Who spent his days grumpishly hiding.  
He hid in his cellar and tried to ignore  
The ghastly intruders who knocked on his door:  
The horrible humans who came by the score  
To sell him aluminum siding.

"Act now," said the salesman, "and buy, at low cost . . ."  
"I GAVE AT THE OFFICE!" the Troll said. "GET LOST!"  
"But **this** is a product you're **certain** to try . . ."  
"THERE'S NOBODY HOME!" the Troll answered. "Good-Bye!"  
Twelve salesmen, three postmen, and one Candy-Gram  
Were met at the door by a very loud "**SCRAM!**"

One day, overladen with bundles, a maiden  
Came into the bog, travel-weary and sore.  
With trunks and valises and twenty-six pieces  
Of baggage, she knocked on the Troll's oaken door.  
"GO HOME!" the Troll screamed at her. "BEAT IT! QUIT  
STALLING!"  
But she stood her ground and replied; "**Avon calling . . .**"

\* \* \*

"I've toilette notions and after-shave lotions  
A Troll of distinction (like you, sir) should own.  
I've napkins and diapers and fingernail-wipers  
And forty-three cases of Eau de Cologne.  
I've moustache-remover, a portable Hoover,  
A razor that comes with a sharpening-stone . . ."  
"HOLD ON!" the Troll bleated. "YOU WIN! I'M DEFEATED!  
I'LL BUY THE WHOLE MESS IF YOU'LL LEAVE ME  
ALONE!"

In a pool of perfume, in a sweet-scented hole  
Full of creams and colognes lived a wartyish Troll  
Whose moans echo off through the distance.  
He lurks amid gallons of lilac shampoo,  
Six cases of soap, and a hair-dryer too  
And hopes that, next time Avon Ladies come through,  
He'll show a bit more sales-resistance.

# THE OBSERVATORY

by George H. Scithers

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We are indebted to Mr. Hal Hall of the Sterling C. Evans Library of Texas A & M University for bringing to our attention a long-standing mix-up in the volume and issue numbering of this magazine. The August 1979 issue of the magazine was marked (correctly) as volume 52, number 4. It was also the 489th issue of the magazine to be published. The 490th issue, however, was marked (incorrectly) as volume 27, number 5. It should have been volume 53, number 1. This mix-up in volume and number continued through the 506th issue of the magazine, for January 1983.

Through most of its history, *AMAZING™ Science Fiction Stories* — originally *Amazing Stories* — numbered its volumes to correspond with the year of publication. Originally, the volume number changed at the anniversary issue, April; but during the Ziff-Davis years, the volume changed at the beginning of each calendar year.

To straighten all this out, we are now going back to the old volume count, retroactive to the incorrectly marked, 490th issue. We are changing from one volume to the next, at or immediately after the magazine's anniversary. Therefore:

Whole number 490, for Nov. 1979 becomes volume 53 number 1;  
Whole number 491, for Feb. 1980 becomes volume 53 number 2;

Whole number 492, for May, 1980 becomes volume 54 number 1;  
Whole number 493, for Aug. 1980 becomes volume 54 number 2;  
Whole number 494, for Nov. 1980 becomes volume 54 number 3;  
Whole number 495, for Jan. 1981 becomes volume 54 number 4;  
Whole number 496, for Mar. 1981 becomes volume 54 number 5;

Whole number 497, for May, 1981 becomes volume 55 number 1;  
Whole number 498, for Jul. 1981 becomes volume 55 number 2;  
Whole number 499, for Sep. 1981 becomes volume 55 number 3;  
Whole number 500, for Nov. 1981 becomes volume 55 number 4;  
Whole number 501, for Jan. 1982 becomes volume 55 number 5;  
Whole number 502, for Mar. 1982 becomes volume 55 number 6;

Whole number 503, for Jun. 1982 becomes volume 56 number 1;  
Whole number 504, for Sep. 1982 becomes volume 56 number 2;  
Whole number 505, for Nov. 1982 becomes volume 56 number 3;  
Whole number 506, for Jan. 1983 becomes volume 56 number 4;  
Whole number 507, for Mar. 1983 is volume 56 number 5.

And whole number 508, for May, 1983 will be volume 57 number 1; the first issue of our 57th year of publication!





# **EPITAPH**

**by Bill Pronzini**

**art: Alex Schomburg**

There were sandstorms the day he arrived on Mars to visit his father's grave.

It was his first trip to the Red Planet; it was the first time he had left Earth. His name was Craig Thomas Dennison and he was twenty-one years old. The sandstorms awed him, as did the great plastoid bubble that enveloped Mars Colony, as had the ship and the sweeping vistas of space. And they frightened him too, because it was during just such a storm that his father had murdered two men and taken his own life twenty years before.

In the minutes before a ground shuttle carried him away from the passenger airlock, he had a brief, closeup look at the turbulence outside. Great clouds of dust and sand, driven by strong Martian winds, billowed and swirled and capered like a sinister red mist. It was impossible to see anything through it; it blotted out the landscape and most of the sky, had forced the ship into a delayed landing. He wondered how long this sort of weather would go on. His Visitor's Permit, which had taken him a year to obtain back on Earth, was only good for one week. If he did not do what he'd come to do in that time, he was certain he would not be granted an extension.

The shuttle deposited him in the center of the colony. There was nothing in the way of a hotel or visitors' accommodation; this was still a pioneer settlement, only two decades old, and it had not progressed far enough to welcome casual guests. Most of those who maintained permanent residency were geologists, engineers, and miners engaged in the tapping of Mars's natural resources. Some of their spouses lived with them, but no children were allowed because there were no facilities to care for them.

Barracks-type prefab buildings housed stores, electrical generators and mining equipment, recreation and medical facilities, and provided dormitory space for the unmarried men and women. Married couples paid extra for small, plain prefab houses; the colony's administrators had larger houses and paid nothing for them. Craig knew all this because the shuttle driver had explained it to him on the short ride in. The driver had also told him how to get to the house that belonged to Orin Masters and his wife.

He found it without difficulty. It was like all the others in a two-block row near the main street, except for a hydroponic vegetable garden along one wall. Orin Masters turned out to be a man in his middle fifties, with graying hair and a blaze-shaped radiation scar on his neck. Both Masters

and his geologist wife, who had agreed by letter to put him up, seemed genuinely glad to meet him. They asked how things were back home, showed him where he would sleep, and gave him something to eat. Neither of them mentioned his father; Craig understood that they were waiting for him to broach the subject himself.

Masters had spent nearly all of the past twenty years on Mars and the living area was cluttered with memorabilia — photographs, tools, geological specimens, a framed personal commendation from a former President of the United States, laminated newspaper clippings following the progress of the *Lorelei I* team and announcing the establishment of Mars Colony. One of the photographs was of the entire *Lorelei I* crew, taken at Cape Kennedy just prior to liftoff. Masters stood in the foreground with his arm around a tall, sandy-haired man in his late thirties who wore the bars of a lieutenant on his Academy uniform. The sandy-haired man was Stephen Dennison, Craig's father.

He looked at the photograph for a long time before he turned to face his host again. Then he said, "You were Dad's best friend, Mr. Masters. You knew him better than anyone in the Service."

"I suppose I did," Masters said quietly.

"What kind of man was he?"

"I think you know the answer to that, son. A good man, a kind and caring one. A little wild sometimes, but then we all were. And still are. It's the nature of the beast."

"Then what made him do what he did? What made him go berserk and murder two other men?"

Masters shook his head; his eyes were sad. "Son, that's a question that's been asked a thousand times in the past twenty years, by me and your mother and a lot of other people. There's just no way we'll ever know, exactly. There were only three men on that ground expedition and they were all dead when we found them."

"The official report said that it was probably storm-related."

"It must have been. Your father showed no prior symptoms of a psychological breakdown; he seemed as stable as any of the rest of us. More than one man lost his mind in a Martian sandstorm, you know — and after being trapped for fewer hours than your dad — in the days before Out-suits were fitted with Narcotizers for self-protection."

"What is it about the storms that's so terrible?"

"It's difficult to explain," Masters said. "They're . . . well, *alien* is the only word I can think of. All that sand and dust swirling dark red, hellish, and the way the Specters jump out at you — it's like nothing on Earth."

"Specters?"

"Phantom images that seem to appear and disappear at random. Shadow-shapes you'd swear are malevolent. You must have read about them."

"Yes, but they're never described very well."

"They're not something you can describe," Masters said. "They have to be experienced. If you ever have the misfortune, then you'll understand."

"Aren't they some sort of optical illusion?"

"Yes. Created by the composition of the sand and the atmospheric elements and the way the wind blows. But that doesn't make them any less real when you're caught up in a storm, or any less frightening. On the *Lorelei I* we got to calling them Specters — as if they were the ghosts of a lost Martian race, you see."

Craig was silent for a time. Then he said, "I've read that you get a lot of these heavy storms."

"A fair number. Depends on the season. They're unpredictable; that's why you have to be careful any time you leave the bubble."

"But how long does weather like this usually last?"

"That depends too. Each storm seldom blows more than twenty-four hours, but sometimes they come so close together there's hardly any letup. I've known them to go on for days at a time."

"It's not going to be like that now, is it? While I'm here?"

"I hope not, son," Masters said. "For your sake, I hope not."

Some time later Craig went out alone and walked to one of the elevated observation areas, where rectangles of clear plastoid made viewing windows in the curving wall of the bubble. The turbulence beyond had an eerie quality, all right; it made him feel uneasy even watching it from a safe distance. He tried to imagine what it had been like, that day when his father and Yeomen Seavers and Bercovich left the *Lorelei I* on an overnight hunt for geological specimens. The sandstorm had come up unexpectedly near dusk, he knew, and the three men had sought shelter for themselves and their equipment under an overhang of rock. But then what? Radio contact had been lost almost immediately: atmospheric interference. What had they done and thought and said to each other during the long hours that followed? This he could not imagine, any more than he could visualize what the Specters were really like.

It had been thirty-seven hours before the storm finally blew itself out. When the team neither contacted the ship nor showed itself after a reasonable time, Commander Hirachi had sent out a search party composed of Masters and three others. They found the three dead men under the overhang, all of them buried by sand and dust, with only part of a single piece of equipment visible above ground to mark the spot. Seavers and Bercovich had been beaten to death with one of the survey tools, the first blows apparently having come without warning and having shattered the faceplates of their suits. Stephen Dennison lay apart from them, the bloody tool clenched in his hand. His breathing apparatus had been torn loose — an evident act of self-destruction.

The bodies of Seavers and Bercovich had been frozen and eventually returned to Earth for burial. The body of Lieutenant Stephen Dennison, however, according to the articles of spatial law covering criminal deaths, had been dishonorably buried beneath the Martian sands, in an isolated place less than a mile from the site of Mars Colony. The exact location of his grave had been recorded and the data sent to his next of kin, Craig's mother, back home in Northern California. The grave itself had been marked with a plain wooden cross, sans name or inscription.

From the time Craig had been old enough to understand and accept what had happened to his father, he had made up his mind that one day he would go to Mars, visit the gravesite, and witness conditions for himself. He had never known his father — he had been three months old when Stephen Dennison left Earth in the *Lorelei I* — but his mother had shown him photographs and vid-tapes, and shared anecdotes and reminiscences, and never allowed him to lose respect for his father's memory. No matter what he might have done in that alien place, she would say, the Stephen Dennison she had known was as fine a man as any who had ever lived.

For her, however, a pilgrimage to Mars was unthinkable. It was a world that had robbed her of love and happiness, and made her forever lonely; and she had hated it and would have nothing to do with it. So Craig had had nothing to do with it either, in deference to her. He had spoken to her of his plans only once; and she had had such a violent reaction, saying that it had killed her husband and she could not bear to have it kill her son too, that he had never mentioned it again.

But his mother had died over a year ago — of heart failure, the doctors said, and in a way they didn't mean, they had been right. A month afterward he had left Stanford, where he'd been studying psychology and sociology, and applied for his Mars Colony Visitor's Permit. And now he was here, waiting. And before long, if the weather permitted, the waiting would be over.

He thought of that plain wooden cross in the red sand. The idea of that cross had haunted him for years — and that, too, was part of the reason why he was here on Mars. He had come to replace it with a headstone, one that bore the name of Lieutenant Stephen Dennison, one that bore an inscription he had not yet decided upon.

He had come to write his father's epitaph.

The storm broke on the morning of the second day. First the winds slackened and the turbulence grew less violent; then the clouds of dust and sand lost their opacity, and visibility gradually lengthened; and finally the air cleared: the sand began to settle groundward. By early afternoon one could see the dark sky through the viewing windows and one could look out over the flat Martian landscape: moonlike ridges and craters, oddly irregular rock formations, smooth sand dunes stretching away into



the distance like frozen waves on a red sea. It looked arid and desolate — a lonely place to die, a terrible place to be buried for all eternity.

Craig had spent a restless twenty-four hours, part of the time being shown around the colony by Masters and his wife, part of the time making preparations for his visit to the gravesite and for the manufacture of a headstone. Once the storm ended he was eager to leave right away. Masters agreed that this was a good idea. There was a strong possibility of another storm picking up later in the afternoon, and the colony's meteorological team was predicting heavy winds and storm activity for the next few days; this might be Craig's only reasonable chance to leave the bubble before his seven-day Permit expired.

Masters directed him to one of two smaller airlock passages used for ground traffic. The ground car he was driving belonged to Masters, who had shown him how to operate it; he had also been given a lesson in the functional use of a lightweight Out-suit, including explicit instructions on the Narcotizer unit. As he was putting on the suit, Masters watched him with solemn, paternal eyes.

"It's been awhile since I stopped by the grave myself," he said. "Are you sure you want to go alone?"

"Yes sir," Craig said. "I have to do it that way."

"All right then. We've been over the maps enough times and it's not far; and you know how to use the radio-com. I guess you'll be okay."

"I'll be fine, Mr. Masters."

"Just remember, if the wind starts kicking up sand you get back here in a hurry. And if you should happen to get caught and zero visibility sets in, you radio your position and use the Narcotizer right away. Don't hesitate."

"I won't forget," Craig said.

He made sure his suit was functioning properly and then drove inside the airlock. The gates closed behind him; he sat looking through the clear-plastoid wall at the lockmaster, avoiding the Mars vista that lay in front of him. Even though he would never have admitted it to Masters, he felt nervous and afraid. The prospect of being alone out there, in the same hostile environment that had been responsible for his father's death, had not bothered him during the past twenty-four hours; but now that it was imminent, only seconds away, he could feel primitive terrors piling up inside him. And he could not help wondering if this was how his father had felt the first time *he'd* gone out alone into the Martian wastes. . . .

It was five minutes before the outer lock gates swung open. Craig waited until they were yawning wide; then he took a breath and slid the controls into a forward gear. The ground car rolled slowly out of the lock, began to plow through the buildup of sand on its heavy tractor treads.

The maps showed a road here, leading southwest some four miles to a feldspathic-mineral quarry, but it was invisible now beneath the layers of

sand. Later, Masters had told him, after the atmospheric conditions stabilized, a heavy-duty sandthrower would be dispatched to clear the roadway. As it was, Craig was forced to navigate at a reduced speed by the ground car's gyroscopic compass and the detail map open on the seat beside him.

The day was dark, the light murky and gray. Little gusts of wind ruffled the terrain, sending up puffs and funnels of sand; but there did not seem to be an immediate danger of another storm. If there were any others from the colony out here, Craig neither encountered them on the hidden road nor saw any sign of them in the rust-colored vastness.

Behind him, the bubble dwindled in size until it was not much larger than a low mound on the horizon. He kept turning to look back at it. It was his only link to civilization, to humanity; and he felt reassured by it. Still, the uneasiness and the atavistic fear grew stronger. And when his heading took him and the road around one of the jumbled rock formations and he lost sight of the bubble altogether, his mouth dried and there was a painful tightening sensation in his groin. He could feel himself sweating heavily, even though the suit was temperature-controlled.

The location of his father's grave was nine-tenths of a mile from the colony. He saw the landmark Masters had told him about loom up on his left: a configuration of basalt rock weirdly shaped, but with one angle of it — if you looked long enough — resembling a crude letter S. He veered in that direction, checked the compass to make sure he had not misread the landmark. He was only two degrees off the proper course.

When he reached the S-shaped angle of the formation he brought the ground car to a stop. The grave was on the lee side, Masters had said, sheltered in a kind of niche hollowed out of the crystalline basalt. He got out, taking evenly-spaced breaths of the oxygen mixture the suit provided, trying not to think about the emptiness that surrounded him, and slogged ahead along the jutting sweep of rock.

The sand buildup, and the weighted shoes that were necessary to counteract the three-eighths Earth gravity, made the going slow and wearying. You got used to it, according to Masters; and after awhile you found you could function in an almost normal fashion. But that was after awhile. The sweat kept rolling off him; his mouth was so dry it felt burned. It was no more than fifty meters from the ground car to the niche on the lee side, but he felt as if he had walked miles when he finally covered the distance.

The niche was some three meters wide and six meters deep, partially shielded at its end by angles of rock. There was nothing to see inside it, no sign of the plain wooden cross: blown sand from countless storms had gathered in there and covered everything under decimeters-deep layers. How long had it been since anyone came here? Craig wondered. Years? And how many had come altogether in the past two decades — two, three,

or just Masters alone?

His vision began to blur; a wetness that was not sweat trickled down over his cheeks. He blinked his eyes clear, fumbling at his belt for the portable sandthrower Masters had given him. He stood back and to one side, aimed the thrower along the back wall of the niche, and switched on at maximum power.

Sand and dust billowed up around him. It was like a thick fog at first, but the longer he kept the thrower on, the more dense it became. Then he couldn't see anything at all and a panicky sensation overtook him; he switched off, pressed back against the rock wall. But the sand did not settle right away. It was fine and ashy and hung in the dry air, swirling when little drafts caught it, creating an eerie pulsing effect that made him imagine himself trapped inside a swollen, blood-dark artery.

He began to see vague shadows every time he moved his head; they seemed to dart at him, only to disappear when he tried to focus on them. Specters? Was this what they were like? The thought made him shiver. Then he thought that it would be worse, much worse, in a sandstorm; this was only a pallid sample. And he shivered again.

After a time the sand began to thin out and there were no more shadows. When he had visibility again it was like looking through a curtain of reddish gauze. Most of the sand had settled toward the niche's entrance, forming a dune that sloped away from the rear wall. But he still had not exposed the grave or even the tip of the cross. He adjusted the sandthrower to low power, held it down close to the ground before he flicked on again. This time he used it in a series of short sweeps, shutting off each time before the unit could spin up another enveloping cloud.

It took him fifteen minutes, working that way, to uncover the cross and another five to get down to the grave itself. A mound of laser-cut rocks: that was all it was, with the cross anchored between two large chunks at the head. The cross had once been white, but even duropaint had not been able to withstand the Martian elements; now it was a dull, brickish gray.

Craig stood looking down at it for a long while. His eyes filmed again and he seemed to be having trouble with his breathing. Abruptly he went to his knees and bowed his head and tried to think of words, a prayer, something appropriate to say. But his mind was blank, as empty as the wastes all around him —

"What are you doing here?" a voice said over the radio-com inside his helmet.

It startled him, made him suck in his breath, would have made him scramble to his feet if it had not been for the cumbersome suit. As it was, he got himself twisted enough to look behind him just as the voice said, "What are you doing here?" a second time.

There was a man standing beyond the dune, at the niche's entrance. He

was wearing an old-fashioned Out-suit, the kind with the narrow face-plate, and not much of his face was visible; but Craig could see enough to recognize male characteristics, a pair of heavy-browed eyes. And the voice, unsmeared by static, had clearly been masculine.

Craig managed to lift himself off his knees, using the sandthrower as a fulcrum. When he was facing the other man he said, "I'm Craig Dennison. This is my father's grave."

The newcomer neither spoke nor moved for several seconds. Then he came forward across the dune, stopped again less than a meter from where Craig stood. Behind him, Craig could see that the wind had picked up, and the eddies and funnels of sand were larger now, giving the flat terrain an oddly populated look, as if it were covered with scampering, misshapen things.

"Nobody should come here," the man said. "Not even Stephen Dennison's son. Least of all his son."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he was a murderer and he died in disgrace. He doesn't deserve the respect of anyone."

Craig tried to work wetness through his mouth. "Did you know my father?"

"I knew him."

"On the *Lorelei I*?"

"Yes."

"But not back on Earth?"

"I knew him there, too. Or thought I did."

"Then you have to know he was a decent human being —"

"He killed two young men, struck them down in cold blood. Seavers and Bercovich were both twenty-five years old; did you know that?"

"Yes, I knew it."

"Stephen Dennison was a murderer and a madman."

"But that was only at the end," Craig said. "It was the alien environment that drove him mad; it wasn't his fault. It just wasn't his fault."

"He should have been stronger. But he was weak. And a coward. A cowardly murderer."

"No, you're wrong," Craig said, and for the first time in his life he was absolutely sure. He had defended his father a hundred times before, as a child in the cruel world of children, as an adult in the sometimes phlegmatic world of academia. But always there had been a vague doubt, a lingering uncertainty. That was also part of what had driven him to Mars and brought him here to the gravesite: a need to see it all for himself, so that he might be able to understand the truth. Now the doubt was gone; he believed in the portrait of Stephen Dennison his mother, and others like Orin Masters, had painted for him. "It was the sandstorm, being trapped in it for so many hours. Terrors building up inside him, primitive

fears. And the Specters — ”

“What do you know about the Specters?”

“Little enough, but I had a sample of them a while ago. I can understand how terrible they must really be.”

“You can understand nothing,” the man said. “Not until you’ve lived with them yourself in the red dark. Demons, that’s what they are — alien shadow demons that come out of the red dark and crawl inside your suit, touch your face with their dry dead hands and try to pluck out your soul.”

There was an icy slithering along Craig’s back. On the plain beyond, the wind was rising; he could almost hear the skirling sound of it, and he could see the quickening pace of the sand things. Even the dust at the niche’s entrance was beginning to kick up in thin puffs, making the air dusky, further obscuring the face behind the narrow viewplate.

“But that’s all right,” the man said, “you have to be strong, you can’t give in to them. Seavers and Bercovich — they were only kids. Only kids. They cracked fast, both of them, fast, crumbling on each other’s fears. But Stephen Dennison didn’t have to do what he did to them. They weren’t going to attack *him*, that was only part of his delusion.”

More chills. And the sand beginning to dance and caper around them, building shadows, building Specters.

“But he did it, he killed them, and then he was alone. Alone. Hours and hours, with the demons all the while trying to pluck out his soul and the dead boys lying there near him, *their* souls already gone, and finally he couldn’t be strong any more — he was weak, he was a weakling and a coward and a murderer and he deserved to die. So he killed himself to keep the demons from taking his soul. And the men came from the ship and found him and buried him here in his disgrace. You understand? He deserves to lie here alone.”

“No.” Trembling word, pushed out through layers of dryness.

“Yes. Go away from here before the demons come for your soul. Go away.”

• “Not until you tell me who you are.”

“Go away. Go away.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Stephen Dennison,” the figure said, “I’m your father.”

And in the next second it was gone, vanished like a specter in the red-dark swirls of sand.

Craig and the laboring ground car reached the bubble before the new storm could gather full force and drop visibility to zero. He found Masters waiting for him, anxious and questioning, but he did not tell the older man about the incident at the gravesite. He would tell no one about it, not now and not ever.

He did not believe he had actually spoken to his father’s ghost, like a

latter-day Hamlet transplanted to Mars. Nor did he disbelieve it. Perhaps he had hallucinated the whole thing — the effects of tension, the alien landscape, and the power of his own imagination. And perhaps he hadn't imagined it; strange things happened here, on this place of Specters. It did not make a difference either way. He had learned all he needed to know, and whether the knowledge had come from an apparition or from intuition or osmosis, he was convinced that it was the truth.

The incident had convinced him of another truth as well: that something must be done about the Specters. The Narcotizer units were only a stopgap measure; they did not solve the problem. No one seemed dedicated to solving it — but there was no reason why someone could not or would not find a solution one day. Someone young and reasonably intelligent, for example, with a personal stake in the matter and a background in the study of psychology, who could channel all his energies into the creation of a psychological conditioning program for Mars-bound people. Someone such as himself. Yes, and if he were successful in laying these particular ghosts, the achievement would serve as the most fitting of all possible epitaphs for his father. Maybe then the spirit of Stephen Dennison would finally find some measure of eternal peace.

But now, first, he must finish the balance of what he had come here to do. He must see to it that the headstone was completed, that it replaced the plain wooden cross. That it contained a different, if no less fitting, epitaph.

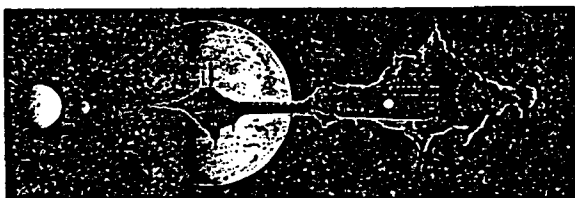
He had already decided, on the ride back to the bubble, what the inscription would be. Below his father's name, these lines from the 19th century poet Swinburne:

*Before the beginning of years  
There came to the making of man  
Time, with a gift of tears;  
Grief, with a glass that ran;  
Pleasure, with pain for leaven;  
Summer, with flowers that fell;  
Remembrance fallen from heaven,  
And madness risen from hell;  
Strength without hands to smite;  
Love that endures for a breath;  
Night, the shadow of light.  
And life, the shadow of death.*

And below them, two final lines from Shakespeare — spoken by Hamlet as a kind of epitaph for his father:

*He was a man, take him for all in all,  
I shall not look upon his like again.*

*Bill Pronzini is the author of 27 novels and more than 250 short stories, articles, and essays; the bulk of these are in the mystery/suspense field. He has also edited or co-edited 16 anthologies in a variety of categories. In science fiction, he has published numerous short stories; one novel in collaboration with Barry N. Malzberg, *Prose Bowl* (St. Martin's Press, 1980); and four collaborative anthologies. His most recent books are a fantasy/horror anthology, *Specter!*, and a humorous history of bad crime fiction, *Gun in Cheek*.*



## **TO A COLONIST**

Lover, if you must go to Jupiter's crimson  
fiery moon leaving the lovely green  
of Earth — the nourishing grain, sun-drunken bees,  
bull-roar of ocean, all the windy trees —  
then know that I'll go too, daring the flight  
to those erupting cones, that flickering light,  
the lava beds of fire-tormented stone.  
In that red hell you will not be alone.  
This world's familiar symbols — red and green  
for stop and go — can never tame desire.  
Our passion, sealed in perma-glass, will grow  
like hothouse plants. As I have loved you here  
on grass, on moss, so shall I love you there  
in that dark glow of sulphur-tainted air.

**— Hope Athearn**

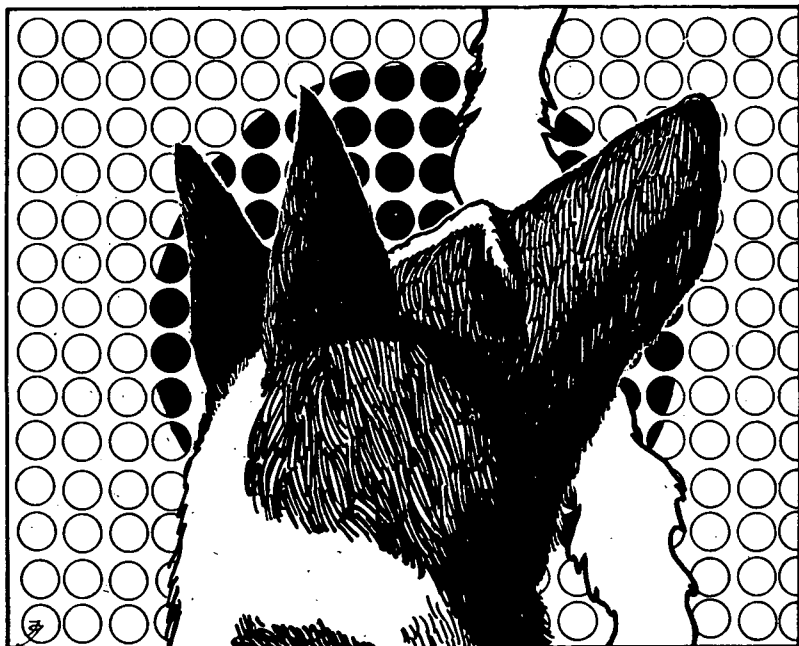
**Epitaph 31**



# I LOST MY LOVE TO THE SPACE SHUTTLE COLUMBIA

by Damien Broderick

art: Jack Gaughan



*Mr. Broderick tells us that he did his basic research for this story during a visit to Washington Heights in 1981, where he house-sat for John Douglas of Timescape Books and went on daily strolls with a member of the Douglas household, "discussing the space program on some occasions and the opposite sex on others; these walks were taken pooper-scooper and leash in hand because of the present-day social pressures," and both Damien and his companion "envisioned how much better things might be in the near future."*

*Damien Broderick was born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1944, and is the author of a story collection published in Australia in 1965, Sorcerer's World (Signet, 1970); The Dreaming Dragons (Pocket Books, 1980); and Judas Mandala (Timescape).*

"Jane, you simply cannot marry a dog. The idea is ridiculous."

I continued to unfold my trousseau, putting the linen neatly to one side and the silk undies to the other. With determined patience I said, "I will brook no obstacle in this matter. I shall not be opposed."

My mother wrung her hands, staring into the afternoon's gold glow, framed against the handsome proportions of the bedroom window. "You always were a dreadfully wilful child, Boojum."

"Boring, Mother. Boring. Really." Some of the linen was from my father's new or current wife or spouse; we had not yet, in fact, established my step-parent's gender, due to the postal strike.

"It's all very well for you to take that attitude, my girl. But the fact remains that it is we who must live with the neighbours."

I began to grow angry. "Damn the neighbours, Mother. If I cared what the Fosters deemed proper I should still be wearing a veil."

"You are being hysterical, dear," Mother told me in an etiolated tone. "You know as well as I that you have never worn a veil in your life."

"A figure of speech." She can be perfectly exasperating.

"Nor a yashmak," she said, ploughing on heedless of my raised eyes and muttered imprecations, determined to have her say, "nor a garden hat. And I cannot imagine that this terrier gentleman —"

"Kelpie, Mother. Do try."

"— this kelpie fellow is without a degree of social sensitivity of his own. Don't deny it; I know you, my girl, we might differ on some things but I trust your instincts to that extent. This dog of yours will feel uncomfortable in our circles. He will find himself expressing an interest in Mr. Percy's peahens only to be misunderstood, and how will you feel about that contretemps?"

Glacially I told her, "It is our intention to emigrate to Australia."

Mother uttered a ferocious bray. "I see. He's found an opening on a sheep station, then?"

"That's not even remotely funny." I closed the lid of the heavy carved Chinese glory box, and crossed the room to the mirror. My hair had lost some of its gloss. I found part of a dry leaf tucked in near my ear and quickly crushed it between my thumb and index finger, crumbling it, letting the fragments sift to the carpet. Try as one might, running through the park is a dusty business in late October. "There is scarcely any call on a sheep station for a theoretical nuclear physicist."

"God forbid that I should belittle his mathematical skills. In regard to this grotesque proposal, Jane, it's clear enough to me that Bowser has calculated to a nicety —"

Seething, I let my brush fall to the floor and turned on her, cheeks so flushed I could feel their heat. "His name is Spot, Mother, as you know. I will not have —" My breast heaved; all the words whirled in my brain. "As you know because we have conducted this tedious argument suffi-

ciently often and with such a plethora of redundancy that I am heartily sick of it." I looked around blindly for the brush, took up a silver-backed comb instead. Mother held her tongue but I was not appeased. I watched her reflection. "Bitch," I muttered.

She gave a satirical snort, and left the room. I could have kicked myself.

I was not totally without sympathy for her qualms, though I'd have died before admitting so. On the other hand I judged her objections fundamentally reactionary. In this age of moonshots and dime-store hand calculators, it seemed to me not merely ignoble but rather trite to find some course of action offensive simply because it was not hallowed by family tradition.

The fact is, Spot is the brightest dog I have ever met. He entered college under a special program, endowed by the Chomsky Institution, and was a wild fellow, mad for poetry and drinking all night and the theatre. He swiftly discerned that culture as such is problematical, over-determined, quixotic, that its appeal is essentially to the intellectually lightweight. He dabbled in painting for a time, creating a small stir with his innovative brush stroke. But it was the endless wonder of science which spoke to his heart of hearts, and led to his specializing first in chemistry and finally in the application of Sophus Lie's groups to that previously intractable poser, the 'periodic table' of elementary particles and their resonances. Much of his work was awfully abstruse and beyond my modest attainments, yet Spot retained a sense of primal joy in his assault on the universe. One might come out into the yard with a bone from the table (for he was then living at our house under an exchange arrangement) and find him gazing raptly at the moon, his lips parted, inflamed with an innocent intoxication so much purer than his raunchy nights backstage with the Royal Shakespearean Company. I was struck then, fondly, by his ardent, wistful expressions, like Carl Sagan's. Any comparison I might make, however, is bound to be misleading. I'd never met anyone, man or woman, who affected me so piercingly. Before I knew it, I was head over heels in love with a dog, and I am prepared to confess that at first I was just as astonished and taken aback by this discovery as was my dear bitter mother a few months later when Spot went in to announce our intentions.

I suspect that what brought Mother around in the end was the flamboyant song and dance my father laid on when the word reached him in Hollywood, or wherever the banal location was where he was shooting his latest depredation. My desire to marry he found innately disagreeable, as who would not who had entered that singular state fourteen times, yet Randy discerned a redemptive quality in my choice of spouse.

"Just so long as it's not one of those godawful boys next door, sweetie," he told me when the company finally had the telephone lines operating in the correct manner.

"He's nice," I said in the high light voice with a giggle at the corners of

it that I use with Randy when I want something out of him. "You'll like him. Tee hee."

"Ah, your laugh's a tonic, Jinny." He paused and became very serious. "Just assure me on one score, sweetie. I can appreciate his interest in quantum mechanics, but I must be certain . . . he doesn't bite, does he?"

Strange question, from the father you love. Dote on. When you're trying to con him. (His wife was in fact, it had eventuated, a woman, though only just. Had the rules of entry been a hair more stringent she might easily have graced the hippo category. Still.) After all, it wasn't as if Spot had rabies. I decided to treat the matter as a rather coarse attempt by Papa to protect his pocketbook while pretending at levity: i.e. that by 'bite' he was employing the demotic locution for 'seek undue financial advantage through abuse of personal connections.'

Coolly, therefore, I told my father, "He has money of his own these days. His work on the correction of pitting in nuclear power containment vessels has brought us a comfortable stipend from Con Ed and certain other sizeable corporations." No need to tell Randy everything. "Rest assured, Daddy. He won't bite you."

"No, no, nothing like that," my father said, "perfectly all right. No, pet, it's just that in that case I hope his quark is not worse than his bite." And the terrible man began to shout and shriek with mirth at his own excruciating silliness. Marcia must have told him about quarks, because I know for certain that Randy is no intellectual giant. His talents lie instead in the direction of making money, large amounts of which he expended to make my wedding the happiest day of my life.

Spot rose to his feet at the reception, lurching more than somewhat, and replied to the toast. The cantors smiled, and the mullahs, and the officiating Cardinal applauded, with all his enclave of nuns and monks and a brace of castrati if I'm not in error.

"Acknowledgements," cried my husband, who had been smoking.

"We wish to thank the musicians. All that sawing and smiting, bowing and puffing and groaning, and why? Why, only to soothe the guests into gaiety. Here we go. Lift those ankles and prance.

"The magicians. Tumbling, whipping endless purple, red, gold scarves through the spanking musical air, glorious. Fowls from eggs, great tails lofting under the high crystal-broken whiteness, green feathers, hard green, soft green. Sawn in half. Out of large bolted brass-and-leather boxes, proven empty moments earlier. Sheer magic. Good work, team.

"Some people find the libretto obscure. Not us. We're polyglot. And grateful for the poet's drawn face and crabbed manner and song, song.

"Who else? The lighting people, sure. Beams like harsh metal poles furring, fogging where they splash into astonishing scales of peals of tinkles of gongings of lightning blue, satin pinks, crimsons, purples, and

all the whites, and the rest.

"There's food on every table, here and there in silver porcelain wooden platters slipping from plates into bowls of dip and sauces laid on the tables and marble waiting surfaces: birds, slabs of crusty meat oozing juice, the moon curves of mandarins, oranges, grapefruit, the gold and purple of passionfruit, slimy on the tongue but cut by tart, and tarts all slithery in berries and apricots, pale peaches with sugar crusting, melting cliffs of egg white meringue. So here's one for the chef, the cooks and helpers, the serving staff. Good eating, no doubt, no question there.

"The vintners fetched wine fit to make you drunk, smooth on the tongue and rufous, rough as dog's rasp at some abdominal cavity which finds gentility a bore, but fairly innocent of histamines, thank Christ. We'll drink a round to you lads, gladly.

"Company. The guests. Did your bit, swarmed about, chattered and nattered, and spoke in adopted accents and bellyached just enough that we'd know you were taking the business seriously and giving no quarter out of love of Randy and Joan and the lovely lass herself."

The microphone made spattering noises from this point on, for Spot was salivating with delirious stoned intensity, laughing his fool head off and biting from moment to moment at his own flanks. Bruce Garbage (the punk crooner whom Randy had flown in from San Antonio) tried valiantly to wrest away command of the public address system, but was clearly in terror of having his leather Savile Row suit nipped. Balked, he brought up his fists and swung them down in the gesture which was later to be featured on the cover of *Time*, and his ensemble seized up their instruments once more and heaved themselves into a bout of interactive slam dancing. I was keeping my eye on the mullahs, and at last caught one furtively quaffing a small but wickedly illicit potation. When he found my eye on him he hoisted his skirts and scurried around the table, which was a happy ploy as it turned out; both castrati had passed out, sliding completely from their seats to lie curled like delicious pussycats beneath the wedding table. The guilty mullah did what he could to ease their discomforts.

And the sun poured down like honey and all the wild meadows of my body ran with long-eared hares and does and quail for my love to chase and bring down in his soft, his sharp mouth, and my soul bobbed like a woolly cloud, all my education rising from my loins to the choking of my throat with my breasts all perfume yes and yes I said yes I will Yes.

"Arf," said Spot, forgetting himself.

I felt equally rueful, as you might imagine, when the gentlemen from the government called by to announce that we might not emigrate after all. Their arguments were Byzantine and sturdily documented with sheafs of paper each of a different unusual size. Their case for refusing our exit gave every indication of hinging on Spot's deficiencies as a human

being, a bigoted and unpopular stance; carefully masked, therefore, by technicalities of a veterinarian nature. It quickly came home to me that these machinations in turn were intended to deflect attention from the true reason for our durance, namely, Spot's peerless gifts as a nuclear theoretician. The government wanted my husband to make bombs for them.

"It's the diquark hypothesis," he told me. We had no secrets from one another. Although I wasn't certain that I followed him in every detail, it seemed that rather big bangs could be caused from rather small amounts of fairly rare stuff using another variety of extremely unlikely fizzy material, which failed to add up to zero when you checked the niobium spheres.

Father interceded at once, bless him. An entire battery of lawyers worked around the clock with the opposite numbers in the Administration. Randy had lost his entrée to the Pentagon, unfortunately, following the release of that film.

Possibly with a view to comforting me, Mother called by. She patted my hand. "Rover will be just fine, you'll see."

I kicked her ankle. She hobbled out.

For some days we hid out in a Lina Wertmüller festival. Without disrespect I must reveal that she is not my ideal *auteur*, but Spot always made taking in a movie fun, and I was terrifically excited when he told me how much I had always put him in mind of Mariangela Melato, whom Lina employed with some wit.

"Hang in there, baby," Randy told me from the West coast, his voice oddly interspersed by bleats of telemetry from the space shuttle mission. "We'll have the kid back on the bomb bay floor by New Years." For a fleeting moment I wondered if father's lawyers had misunderstood the quandary facing my husband, and were in fact directing the enormous resources of the studio to the task of getting Spot into rather than out of the weapons research program. Such things had been known to happen.

To relax, we stayed in Daddy's apartment in Washington Heights, and strolled every day to The Cloisters to view the Unicorn Tapestries, for which I have an abiding passion. So sad and limpid. Spot put his ears back and growled, which made me reconsider. The high point of the day, its unmitigated delight, was our romp through Fort Tryon Park, where one step carries you from endless megalopolitan Upper West Side to genuine woods, and a further five minutes shows you the Hudson. By this time the shores were past their highest colors, but reds burned like coals in the midst of all the turning hues of green and yellow and russet. I say unmitigated, but in all honesty I must grant that I never relished the business with pooper-scooper and leash. Joan had given us an elaborate device with plastic bags and a heat-sealer, a sentimental relic of our squashed poodle Phiphi, but while that was to be preferred to the fold of

ScotTowel favoured in the Heights it never seemed to me altogether dignified. One was forced to admit, though, that the menacing glances of elderly folk walking their own Dobermans and Borzoi, pan or towel dutifully in hand, was ample deterrent to a more insouciant delinquency.

On the evening of our last day together, Spot and I ventured into Puerto Rican midtown. Drug dealers conveyed their wares and their opinions to others of their kind on every corner. Dilapidated French restaurants struggled to sustain identity and solvency on one in every four of these corners. Young men struggled past us under the load of their gigantic quadrophonic portable sound systems. Spot danced with pleasure; this milieu was not alien to his roots. It pleased him to strut beside me, a street-wise kelpie in Hell's Kitchen.

"Ghetto blasters," he told me, as one kid bopped past in a drench of Cuban pop. The acoustic values were extraordinary. "Third world briefcase," he said, with a yip of amusement. The Walkman craze had not yet reached the barrio; it seemed to me that these unfortunates needed the combined benefits of conspicuous consumption and enhanced personal presence. A news report roared in our ears, simulcast from two swarthy youths passing us in opposite directions, creating a disturbing illusion of dopplered spin. Whining abruptly, Spot crouched with his ears pricked, swinging his head from side to side in a manner which recalled (I say with some shame) the mascot on His Master's Voice recordings.

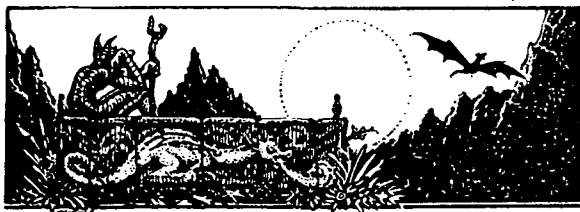
"Los astronautas Joe Engle y Richard Truly visitaron ayer el trasbordador espacial *Columbia* y dijeron que todo luce 'bellísimo' y en perfecto estado para el lanzamiento de mañana," the reporter said rapidly, "siempre que el tiempo lo permita."

My breast became suffused with awful foreboding. I had seen that look in Spot's eye before, under a dust of stars hurled into heaven with a mad jeweller's abandon.

"Space," he cried. "Boojum, the final frontier."

"Please don't call me that," I begged him, down on my knees on the broken, urine-dank sidewalk, arms about his straining neck. "If you must employ a diminutive, I much prefer 'Jinny'."

"The spirit bloweth whither it listeth," said my husband as he quivered and shivered in the epiphany of his hunger, and I knew that I had lost him at last, lost to the call of the wild.

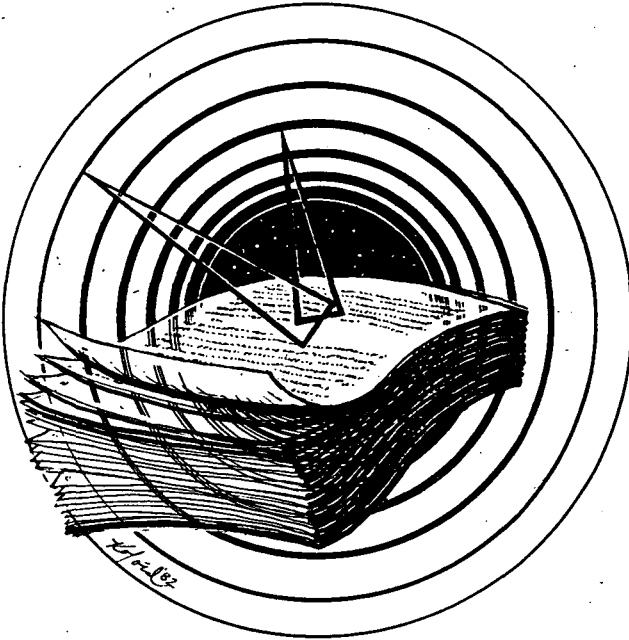




# FAVOR

by J. Michael Matuszewicz

art: Karl Kofoed



*The author reports living with wife, daughter, and his wife's three cats. He has been submitting stories for over twelve years and has just begun selling; this is his third professional SF sale. He is presently flouting Greener's Law (never argue with a man who buys ink by the barrel) in a strange debate on the proper spelling of **nonexistent** or **nonexistant** we're not at all sure which.*

It was one of those dingy little bookshops in an old part of town; the kind where you anticipate finding forgotten literary treasures piled on dusty shelves.

I had walked past it twice, on my way to the convention center from my hotel, and vice versa. (I learned years ago that it is impossible to sleep in the same building with a thousand exuberant fans, some of them mine.) The next day, I left my hotel early enough to allow a quick peek around the shop. A sign in the window promised SF classics, and my personal library needed padding since I left much of my books and papers behind when I left Jill two years ago.

The interior of the shop was a study in contrasts. Little light crept past the dirty windows, but each book was spotlighted by halogen lamps. The display cases, of the newest fashion, had unmistakable age rubbed into them.

A young gentleman sitting on a high stool at the back of the store looked up when I entered.

"Anything in particular today, sir?" he asked in a pleasant voice.

"Just browsing," I told him as I stepped up to the nearest display. Through the badly scratched glass I could see carbon copies of typewritten manuscripts encased in vacuum-shrunk plastic. The shelves behind the case held books, their tight plastic cocoons reflecting the dim spotlights. Obviously, no browsing was allowed here; but when I saw the titles, I understood.

One stack of second sheets two inches thick was Matthew's latest epic, released last year and already being made into a major motion picture. A paperback on the shelf was a Borlo first edition, nearly forty years old. Further down the case I found other examples of recent classics or ancient conversation pieces. The selection was quite small, only thirty manuscripts and twice that many books on this side of the shop; but the choices were quite good. I found only a few which I did not recognize the author or the title; although some were by fans who I hadn't known were published authors yet. I was almost to the end of the counter when I stopped.

There, in its sanitary wrapping, sat the carbon copy of *Almandite*, my first novel.

I stared at it for a long time. It was one of the things I had left when I and Jill, Jill and I, when we . . .

She must have sold it. I hadn't seen her since I had walked out; if she needed money, she had every right to sell it. Since I hadn't written anything since I left her, she deserved more credit for my work than I did.

"Interested in his works?" the young gentleman asked, seeing how I was staring at the story.

"Mildly," I told him. I had not thought of going incognito, but fans always seem to ask embarrassing questions about work in progress. It's

hard to admit you've been working on the same book for three years.

"We have *Almandite* in a hardcover, too. If you are interested."

"Thanks, but I have a copy."

"Ah, a collector," he said mysteriously. "Then may I interest you in a book by his wife?"

"Jill?" I asked incredulously.

"Then you're familiar with his life," the young man said. He went to a counter and drew out a slim volume encased, naturally, in the plastic wrapping.

"He was not an author, but a scribe," I read from the back cover. "He would sit at the typewriter and record the tales as told to him by his many visitors. The fact that his visitors spanned many times and planets and were, in fact, not real did not bother him in the slightest."

"We have no autobiography," the gentleman explained. "But her biography seems to capture his spirit. He was a great writer, considering his condition."

"His condition?" I asked. I was not aware I had a 'condition.'

"Yes," the man replied. "He was healthy, active, and intelligent. Such people rarely become excellent writers. Physical or moral handicaps seem to focus a person's writing. I can use myself as an example: for a year and a half, I was confined to a bed. In that time, I wrote and sold seven short stories and started on a novel. Since my recovery, I haven't had the patience or the time to complete any story I might try to start. I get the inspirations, but the writing it all down proves too much."

"The Abbe Faria said it in *The Count of Monte Cristo*: 'The overflow of my brain would probably, in a state of freedom, have evaporated in a thousand follies,'" I quoted. "'It needs trouble and difficulty and danger to hollow out various mysterious and hidden mines of human intelligence.'"

"Just so," the young gentleman said. "Although, in her book, his wife does say that, when working on *Carlontive*, he actually considered suicide."

How had she known that? *Carlontive* was started just before we parted company. My frustration began months later, depression surfaced only recently.

"He lost his self-confidence?" I asked to keep up my end of the conversation.

"I rather think he lost touch with his unreality," the man replied. "Self-confidence is an elusive thing; many great men have learned to function without it. But if you believe strongly in what you do, it carries you along. The inertia of your work can drag you with it, until suddenly you find yourself finished. If you lack that momentum, confidence in yourself won't get you going."

"Interesting," I said. "I have been having a writer's block. You think I

just lost touch with the scene, the unreality. I need more faith in my work and none in myself?"

"Hard to say," the man smiled. "I was, of course, speaking philosophically."

"Of course," I muttered. Turning Jill's book over and over in my sweating hands, I wanted to rip off the plastic and see what she had said. Did she share my euphoria when *Almandite* was published? Were the conventions as wonderful, and as tiring, for her as they were for me? Why did she mention *Carltonite* which would probably remain forever unwritten? Could she understand that my writing was my real manhood; when I failed in that I failed everything and I didn't want her shackled to half a man?

"Do you think she really loved him?" I asked without thinking.

"She says she did," he replied. "And she provided what moral support he needed."

Yes, she had always been there with the kind words and calm assurances. Had they been *that* important, that without them I was nothing? Three years trying to write one book seemed to say I was lacking something. Jill was the only thing out of my life. I could still record the histories and adventures, but it wasn't the same.

"You speak of him as if he were dead," I commented.

"Well, sure," the young gentleman appeared baffled. "He was, after all, born in 1950 or '55. He could hardly be alive today."

"Hardly," I absently agreed. I looked around the shop again. The book in my hands could not have been published more than a few months ago; already they were treating it as an antique. And, indeed, the edges of the paper were yellowing and the cover was fading. The display lights were of the latest technology, but rust spidered their stainless shells. The cases and counters were worn by years of customer traffic; but they, too, were of the newest style.

A man once told me about dining in a restaurant located fifty years in his own future. I wrote down the story and sold it, but I had not credited the story with any veracity simply because the man who related the tale did not exist at the time.

"If you are interested in the man's work," the young gentleman interrupted my thought. "Perhaps you would like this," he said as he brought out a box from beneath the counter.

I opened it, but left the book sitting in the box. Plastic sealed as all the rest, the blue-green cover was slightly faded.

"It's been signed by the author," the man was explaining. "It's not a first printing, but it is the original edition."

I ran my fingers over the pale cover and said nothing.

"They say he worked on it for years," he told me. "Then, one day, he just sat down and wrote it all out at once."

I turned and looked out the dirty front window. The twentieth century still existed, out there, In here, I wasn't so sure.

"No, no thank you," I said as I laid down the worn copy of *Carltonitive*. "I don't want to read it, not yet." I headed for the door. Forgetting the convention and my scheduled lecture, I ran for the hotel and my typewriter.

The young gentleman locked the front door and pulled the shade. When he turned around, Jill was standing by the back door.

"He's gone," he told her.

"I saw him running," she said. "Do you think we scared him too much?"

"No, I'm sure not," the young man assured her. "Probably just enough."

"I hope so," she said quietly. "His agent said that he hadn't even tried writing in months."

"You told me."

"Oh."

They stood in silence for many long minutes.

"You did a good job with all this stuff," Jill said as she looked around the shop. "I could almost believe I stepped into the future, too. I guess I should help you, getting all this put away, and everything."

"No, that's okay," he reassured her as he started stacking the books together. "I have some movers coming to take the fixtures back to the studio. The books go to the shop just down the street; I can make it in one trip, so there's no problem. And these," he said, picking up the two 'books' he had shown his customer. "Want a copy of the book you never wrote?" he asked as he tossed her one. She tore off the plastic and thumbed the blank pages between the forged covers.

"I don't know," she sighed. "Maybe I will write it after all."

"It might be interesting," the young gentleman said as he began stacking the manuscripts.

"You're sure you don't want anything for helping me?" she asked.

"These manuscripts your friends gave us are enough, more than enough," the gentleman told her. "These copies will be valuable some day."

The conversation between them died.

"We did everything we could," Jill said, half to herself.

The man smiled. "If ever anyone could write, it's him. Writer's block is rarely fatal."

"Yeah, sure," she said as she turned to leave. "But it is a quarantined disease. Once he can finish *Carltonitive*, then he will come back to me. All he needed was a little self-confidence. If we gave him that, we did enough."

"Yes ma'am," the young gentlemen said to her closing door. With her

gone, the man straightened up a few things, then sat down to wait for his ride home. After some futile notes towards a new science-fiction story, he gave up and decided to reread an old classic instead.

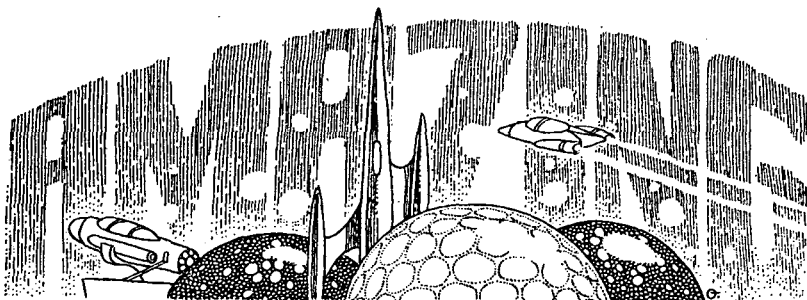
The plastic wrapping had to be cut from the book he chose, but he was careful not to damage the book itself. Turning to the dedication, he looked toward the door through which Jill had just left and shook his head.

"To my wife, Jill," the dedication read. "And to the young man who showed me you don't need to believe in yourself if you believe what you write."

*Maybe there's a story in this somewhere, the young gentleman thought, traveling back eighty-seven years to meet, and help, your favorite author.*

No, he reconsidered. *Everybody's going to be doing it themselves soon anyway.*

Opening to the first chapter of the ancient classic, he began to read *Carbonite* with a new insight.



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# THE DESERT OF VAST ETERNITY

1

On Arab stallions Death's  
Legions press their attack.  
You die or you cross  
The desert. You die.

2

There is no water there  
And I am Aquarius.

3

What is there when you're not,  
Preceded the beginning,  
Will survive the end,  
Is, unwitnessably,  
Anywhere you look. It cannot,  
However, think or read a book  
The way we do. It talks  
In bursts of tachyons  
Inaudible even to astronomers.

4

But I have been mistaken:  
The true desert doesn't commence  
For miles. Here is cactus  
And rattlesnake, abundant,  
And Death, wishing to spare his troops  
The ardors of combat,  
Seems inclined to let us live  
On this margin yet a little while.

— Tom Disch



# CONTINUED LUNACY



Darrell Schweitzer



The city of London creaked and groaned in the cold wind. Shutters rattled like the dentures of shivering old men. Sometimes you could hear children shouting, carriages rumbling over cobblestones, pedlars hawking their wares, or even the cries of seagulls circling over the Thames, but for the most part the wind was lord of the city that day.

It was a clear, crisp day in September or October (one of those months) in the year something-or-other, when Harry Tudor was still on the throne and had just gotten rid of another wife (everyone had stopped counting; it was dangerous); and on this day Tom of Bedlam and his friend Nick, who had been Nick the Gaoler and was now Nick the Lunatic, sat in a muddy alleyway bemoaning their lot. And shivering.

Now sitting and bemoaning (and shivering) are not good things for madmen to do, because it makes them less amusing; and when they present no spectacle, passers-by are less likely to drop coins in their cups. It is a matter of sheer economics. But the air was so fresh that day that all the stink and foggy humors of the city seemed to have dissipated, and it was enough to make even a madman clearheaded.

Tom fingered the intricately carved wooden box he always carried. In it Grandmother Grey was imprisoned, the Winter Witch, and if ever it touched the ground the lid would fly off and out she would come, quick to build herself a house of ice and then a mountain, from which snow would belch and bellow out of a cold forge in the mountain's heart and cover everything. Nick and Tom both knew. They'd seen it happen. But, while the two of them could pass the box back and forth, they could never get rid of it. This put a strain on them, since they could never sleep at the same time, and when begging and making general fools of themselves they worked best as a team, which meant one was always tired. That might make one of them drop the box, which could well bring the end of the world this time.

The problem was convincing people. You had to be out of your mind to believe a story like that.

"Ah, there is a shortage of true lunatics," said Tom.

"Aye, there is at that," said Nick, "but 'tis strange. Did ye not say but a little while ago that there were lunatics aplenty, that it was a splendid time to be mad?"

"Ah, there is a shortage of true lunatics. There are the pretenders, the common tramps and beggars, those who howl because their heads are filled with devils, those whose wits are not scrambled, but merely absent. It's the ones with the true vision, the ones that see the world cockeyed and upside down and inside out — these, these are getting scarce. None of the others are our kind of people."

"Aye, they are not. I wonder where they have gone."

"Who speaks with the flying night hags anymore? Who grimly grapples with the great king of ghosts and ghouls and all his gruesome

crew? Who talks in riddles that don't mean anything, but do? Who reads from the *Book of Moons*, which has no page nor print nor cover?"

"Aye! There is a shortage of folk such as that!"

"What are we going to do about it?"

"No idea."

"The old ways are passing, I fear. But at least I've been remembered in song. Have you heard?"

Not waiting for an answer Tom sang, coarsely, off key:

*"For to see mad Tom of Bedlam,  
Ten thousand miles I'd travel.  
Mad Maudlin goes on dirty toes,  
for to save her shoes from gravel."*

At that Nick laughed and hooted, stood up on his hands and ran around in a little circle, splashing mud. The bells on his cap jingled the tune. Someone opened a window and tossed out a coin. He flipped rightside up just in time to catch it in his teeth, but bit down too late and swallowed the penny, then hiccupped, and had it in his hand.

"A fine song! Fine! But who is Mad Maudlin?"

"Oh, and alas," said Tom, rolling his eyes to heaven, "a maudlin tale it is."

Nick was up on his hands again, his toes wriggling in the air, firmly at attention.

"She was an old lady with a hole in her head," said Tom. "You have not heard? On cold winter nights the wind would blow over the hole like your breath over the mouth of a bottle, and it would make a mournful sound. In the spring wrens nested in there. In summer she used it to store dried fruit. She had been a fruit seller once, you see. But one summer the days were too hot and too long, and she stayed out for too many hours, and her brain dried up. It shrivelled. The next morning she mistook it for a prune and had it for breakfast. After that all her fancy was gone. She was one of those witless souls I spoke of. Eventually she fell into the Thames and was eaten by a crocodile."

"A crocodile? *Here?*"

"A crocodile! *Here!*" shouted several bystanders and overhangers. Windows and doors slammed shut. Bolts and bars dropped. There had been rumors of crocodiles in the gutters and puddles of the city for almost a year now, ever since an African ambassador's crocodile-hide purse had been cut, and later thrown into a sewer. Spontaneous generation, a learned doctor called it. Others claimed a Papist plot.

"No," said Tom, looking this way and that along the now deserted alley. "This crocodile was filled with a vision even when he was in the egg, a sense of grand destiny. So all his days he swam from his home along the Nile, charting his course by the stars, feeding on seagulls that took him for a log and tried to rest on his nose. It was the will of forces far, far beyond

his humble crocodilian self, the very purpose of his existence, that he should devour this lady. And she, being hollow-headed, floated down the river and out to sea. They met halfway, somewhere near Spain, and his quest was ended."

"Oh." Nick sat down again. "Then it was she who took all the charm of lunacy away with her, and that's why life's no good anymore."

"But you still live it."

They sat absolutely still for a minute, as a patrol of the watch came by, armed with pikes, looking for crocodiles and Papists.

"Alas," said Nick when they were gone, looking at his toes which were as dirty as they could ever be, "if the old lady saved her shoes from gravel, I save the gravel from my shoes, not having any."

"And why have you no shoes, Nicholas?" intoned Tom. This was rehearsed, part of their repertoire.

"Because I ate them. I do it every spring on May Day, to make the summer come in."

"Yes, it is one of your best tricks."

"Aye, it is." Nick wrapped his arms around his body and shivered. "So I can't give it up. But times be hard and purses lean, and the air too cold too soon. If I haven't saved enough to buy new shoes by winter, my feet will freeze and snap off."

"I think I have the best solution. I don't wear out any soles, but still I am shod."

Tom's shoes didn't wear out any soles because they were bottomless. They were tied around his ankles. Sometimes they twirled completely around and his feet stuck out.

"But ye don't have to eat them every year to make the summer come in. If only winter wouldn't come so soon. If only autumn would hold off —"

*You could ask this of the one in charge*, a voice suddenly whispered inside Tom's head. Startled as he was, he found himself repeating those very words.

"The one *in charge*?" Nick exclaimed. "Oh no! Not me! I'm still healthy. I'm not ready to meet *him*! 'Sblood, Tom, how can ye say such things?"

"Well we are both stark, staring mad, don't you forget, and besides —" And once more the voice whispered. There was something dry and crinkly in its tone. Blank-faced, Tom repeated, "*Seek the court of the Autumn King. Vast is his realm and beautiful, both far away and near . . . The matter is between you and him. Take a day. Take a week. I shall wait here like a true friend.*"

"Well . . . all right. Ye'd better hold on to the box till I get back." Nick backed away slowly, mystified. Tom didn't seem to be aware of him. Then he laughed, "Why I'd have to be out of my head to do such a thing!" And Tom laughed too; and Nick went off singing, jangling his bells. He

made one penny, two; but not enough, not enough.

Tom stared after him, still in a daze. The whole episode was . . . disquieting. What voice had spoken? He stirred and heard the dry crinkling by his right ear, reached up, and found a dead, dried leaf caught in his hair. It was yellow, with patches of brown, the first fallen of the new season.

Tom slept in a huddle against a wall for a night, for seven, curled up with the box between his knees. By day he wandered among the clutter, looking up at the leaning, rickety houses which sometimes touched overhead to shut out the sun. Tier upon tier they rose, more like ragged, dark cliffs than real houses. The cold mud of London oozed between his toes, caked his feet and became the soles of his shoes for winter. But each noon and each sunset he would return to that same alley, to see if Nick had returned. He had not. The sky was clear. The air was cool. More autumn leaves drifted on the wind.

Near to midnight on the seventh night it came to be somehow, in dream or delirium as he slept, that Tom's mind and that of the crocodile met and merged and held converse. He felt claws dragging through the cold water and the sting of salt in leathery nostrils; and he knew a longing for the warm, muddy, still place where the creature had been born. Deep down and far away, the monster's heart beat like the muted thunder of a drum.

"After all that trouble, did she taste good at least?"

"Southward, southward, and east I swim, through the surging seas. The Pillars of Hercules are behind me now, and soon the waters will grow warm. I can faintly taste my lovely Nile mud. Ah, to be home, to bask in the sun, to devour antelopes and Arab children . . . No, no, no, little man, no crazy man, she was tough and stringy and sour. She had not bathed in seventy-three years, and was too ripe for the palate. I can understand now why her own kind did not eat her. But it was my fate, and the gods ordained it, and it was written, and it was (so an errant Norseman explained to my great-great-great-grand egg-layer ere I was even a hatchling) my doom, my inexorable destiny to perform this thing, so I did, and now I only hope that fate and all the rest will leave me alone. I shall tell the tale to the Holy Ancestral Crocodile when I die, and drift against the current, up the river to its secret source in the hidden valley of Hadoth, where Nephren-Ka, the crocodile that walked like a man — "

"I know. I've been there."

"The Holy Ancestral Crocodile is huger than any other. He is ten leagues in length with his tail uncurled. He rests in the sacred mud, waiting for all scaly folk in the end; and if they have interesting stories to tell, he does not eat them, at least not right away."

"Is eating all you think about? I'm glad I'm not a crocodile."

"In a way, you are, my little one, my morsel. Ah! Why couldn't I have

eaten you instead? You even sound delicious. But it is Fate and the gods, and none can deny them. You cannot escape Fate either, little man. You too drift along the river, away from what you want and where you will, mayhap knowing a little of whither you are bound, borne on the current of years like a chip of wood, like a leaf, like a maiden's tattered skirt after I've had my supper. . . . Listen, little one. You shall drift where your friend has, since it is your task to save him from his deadly peril, which is perilous, I assure you, and deadly, and a waste of perfectly good meat."

"What peril?"

"Southward, southward, and east I swim, through the surging seas. I taste the silt of my beloved Nile . . ."

"Would you excuse me? It's dawn here and I have to wake up."

Tom found himself on the street, with the box in his lap. The dawn dawned. The morning morned. Nick didn't come back. The day was far colder than any that had preceded it, as if they were the advance guard and this one the real thing. Even sane people remarked on it. Those with extra sense and extra money wore extra hose, heavy hats, and thick capes. The rest shivered. The wind blew and blew. The city groaned and creaked. Countless shutters clacked. Tom was getting worried. It was his fate, he knew now, to find out what this was all about.

He sang as he stalked through the streets, not because he was happy, but out of habit, because it was expected of him, and when he did so no one bothered him on his way. His agitation came out in the song:

*"The palsie plague these pounces,  
When I prig your pigs or pullen:  
St. Peter's pie will plop in your eye,  
Perhaps, perchance, per—"*

And he ended up sputtering P's.

Where the city ended and the country widened into fields, he came to a graveyard at the end of a lane. Beyond its walls men and women labored at the harvest. Within, a tall, tall person with horns on his head, a long face, and a pointed cap made of brittle leaves sat swaying back and forth on a tombstone, wailing mournfully as the wind passed through him. He was that thin, his clothes like rags wrapped around a few sticks; and yes, the wind really did blow through him.

"What are you blubbering about?"

"I, sir," said the other, "am a mooncalf, and I am weeping because my mother, the Moon, left me behind last night. She came to touch all the world with her light, and I to dance in it, but she sank too quickly in the sky. I ran and ran, but she was below the horizon before I got there. It is lonely here on Earth. So far you alone have noticed me. Are all the others blind?"

"Something like that. But I cannot tarry. My friend went to see the



King of Autumn on a certain matter, and now I fear he is in terrible danger. A crocodile told me, you see — ”

“Yes, I see. We superlunary creatures see many things. But can you not see that your woes are not nearly as great as mine, being forgotten by the Moon.” The tall fellow started weeping again.

“Stop that! Stop that, you pus-brained whoreson oaf! I don’t care about the Moon. I care about the king. I have to find him.”

“That’s simple. I know that . . . ”

“Then *tell me*, or by God’s wounds I’ll — ”

“You’ll find him in Autumn. Go until you find a leaf that has changed color. Let that be your roadmark. Follow it to another, and another, until you come to a place where all are colored and brittle, and that is the place you seek.”

Tom bowed low and backed away, eager to get going.

“But wait! Now that I have told you this, you must do a favor for me!”

“Later, later. I shall gladly do it later. Now I must save my friend.”

Tom started to run, but in the blink of an eye the creature was off the gravestone and standing in front of him. He had to crane his neck way back to see its face, so tall did the thing stand. The body swayed in the wind, like a wobbly tower.

Then the tower seemed to crumble. The mooncalf leaned down, and down; telescoping on itself, and handed Tom its head, which still spoke, even when removed from its shoulders.

“You really must accept my head as a present. I don’t need it. Really. I’m too tall already. It keeps getting knocked off when I go through doorways.”

“No — no — I’d have to be *mad* to accept such a thing!”

“But you *are* mad! Don’t use that excuse. We superlunary creatures see a lot — ”

The head was tossed. It bounced off Tom’s chest, hit the ground, bounced again, and the teeth clamped onto his leg, just below the knee. He danced and hopped to shake it off, but it would not budge.

The headless body collapsed into a pile of leaves and twigs.

“What do you want?” cried Tom. “What do you want?”

“The Autumn King sent me,” the head mumbled through a mouthful of leg. “Promised he’d send me back to the Moon if I helped. Told me to delay you, until he was ready. I won’t let you go until you tell me all about your times, your travels, travails, troubles — ”

But here the thing underestimated Tom. He began to tell his tales, sing his songs; and he did so with the special intensity of the mind-boggled, the cracked, the melt-a-brained; and before long the listener was all those things, and babbling, retelling any ten of Tom’s stories at once, backwards as often as not, and between babbles it lost its grip on Tom’s leg. When it hit the ground, the flesh crumbled away like dust; and all that

remained was a skull which indeed did look more like a calf's than a man's.

Farther down the road Tom met a man of God, and his fancy moved him to warn, "Be warned, parson, be warned. Beware of crocodiles. Beware and be warned."

"But there are no crocodiles in England," said the parson. "You poor wretch, you must be half-crooked at least. I shall pray for you, that your wits be made whole again." Pray he did, but he didn't give Tom a penny, nor did he heed the warning. (Then again, if everyone did, these dire dooms would never come to pass, and prophets could never say, "Behold, verily, I told you so," and no one would pay them. It's sheer economics.) Sure enough, years later he was called to missionary work in a remote land, where he was eaten by a savage disguised as a crocodile. But that does not concern us here.

("What a waste," said the crocodile in Tom's mind. "It sounds more interesting. Southward and southward I swim . . .")

Tom saw no one for a long time. He wandered along roads and beaten paths until there were no more, and then he crossed fields and climbed hillsides thick with goldenrod and the humming of bees. In the quiet, beneath the clear sky, his jumble of thoughts seemed to untangle and run smoothly, like a stream which has passed the rapids. He began to forget himself, to drift over the land like a milkweed seed on a puff of delicate silk.

He startled a herd of deer in a meadow; and they scampered away, tails flashing.

Several days passed. He spied them faintly against the sunset, huge shapes like figures carved of golden smoke, and the spirit of one day nudged another and said in a voice like the stirring of dust, "He can see us. He isn't like the others."

And Tom was vaguely reminded of who he was and what he had set out to do. He shook the box he carried.

"Grandmother Grey, did you think I'd forget and drop you? Oh, no."

There was no response from within.

He came to a forest without a name, which touches every land like the tides of the sea. It has its inlets and bays, some so small they are scarcely noticed, others huge, but all of them leading just as surely to vast expanses. When there are only green distances in all directions, when the sounds of the world are shut out and strange flowers bloom in the green darkness without fear of the sun, when one can sense something different in the air, something magical, then one has entered that forest of which all others are shadows and reflections. It is no mere wood. It does not open on the other side into the fields of men, but, ultimately, into Faery.

When Tom had come to that place, he knew it. One night he slept and

dreamt of the crocodile swimming south. It was aware of him, but did not speak. The next night he dreamt only of endless, windy distances; and he seemed to be clinging to a pendulum, swinging back and forth beyond the edge of the world. On the third night he heard Nick's voice, far away and far below. He couldn't see anything. He felt rustling, dry leaves all around him. He reached out. The ground gave way. It was as if he lay on the lip of a well and Nick were at the bottom, whimpering, "Tom, Tom, it's cold, cold, and so dark." Then his friend was weeping.

He awoke with a start, sat up, and saw that the leaves on the trees all around him had changed from green to gold, to red and orange, even to a dirty brown which crumbled to the touch.

Birds sang in the branches, but they were not summer birds. One drifted by on its way south.

"Hurry," said Tom. "Don't be lazy. Don't be late."

"Fie, fie," it replied. "I am the signal. I am the sign. The Autumn King does not come until I have gone."

And it went.

Tom walked the way it had come, following the golden leaves. Wherever the colors were densest, there he went. Where even a single living leaf remained, he turned away. At last he came to the center of the forest, where the underbrush gave way completely to the hollowness between the trees, but leaves were piled in such huge heaps that armies of men could have been buried in them. Branches leaned low, heavily laden. The mounds clogged the way almost entirely, rising far over his head in some places. The forest was hushed, expectant. The wind had stopped. With each step, the crunching of leaves became a diffuse rumble, like an avalanche of tiny pebbles, echoing into the distance.

He was entering a mountain range of fallen leaves, often sunk to his belt buckle, even when he stayed in the shallowest parts. His legs heaved up great masses as he went. He held onto the box tightly, lest he trip and Grandmother Grey get loose.

If all the leaves that had ever fallen were gathered in one place, never to sink down into the mud, it seemed to Tom, the accumulation might be like this.

Gradually he perceived that some of the leaf mounds were deliberately shaped. Some resembled walls, with definite, if irregular battlements. Others formed towers, climbing the thickest trunks to hide their tips in the leafy canopy above.

There was a fluttering by his ear. He thought it was a butterfly, but when he turned his head, he saw that it was a single leaf, hovering in mid-air. Another rose beside it, with no wind to hold it up, and another, and another, swirling into a mass, assuming an outline, an oblong shape which refined itself and acquired a head, arms, and legs, and even a face, with fine features made of leaf fragments, all of them in motion, like a

million ants racing through a transparent mold.

"Who . . . are . . . you . . . ?"

Tom bowed with exaggerated courtesy.

"I am come to see your king, good sir. Can you take me to him?"

"Yes . . ."

As Tom watched, astonished, the creature's face became familiar. Its features were those of a butcher he had known, who had tired of his trade one day and wandered into the countryside, still wearing his bloody apron, never to return. Then the face shifted, subtly at first, and became Whistling Jack the Gypsy, who had also not been seen in a long time. Then there was Nick, frightened and lonely.

"No!" cried Tom. "You shan't have him!" He grabbed a stick and struck at the creature, but the stick passed right through, and it collapsed into a pile of leaves.

Windows and doors opened all around him. The leaf castle was alive with light, glaring in the twilight of the deep forest. A gate swung slowly inward, releasing a blast of damp air, which smelled of earth and rotten logs.

Tom hesitated, and all the leaves around him stirred furiously. Then, seeing no other recourse, he went in.

The gate closed behind him far quicker than it had opened. For a while he stood in complete darkness. The damp earth smell was stronger, the ground underfoot muddy and bare, save for a few scattered twigs.

Then the leaves began to glow, red, gold, yellow, all the colors of Fall; and he could see. Before him sat a hunched-over giant clad in a gown of leaves of every hue, crowned with a golden crown, attended by a dozen leaf men. But the most remarkable thing about him was his beard. It was brown, streaked with gold and red, filled with leaves, and so massive and long that it had to be divided in the middle and draped over either of the king's shoulders, until it rose up in long, heavy loops like hammocks, stuffed with leaves and merged with the ceiling. Tom looked up and could not tell where the leaves of the beard ended and the leaves of the castle wall began, and then he realized that *they didn't*. The entire place, and those enormous mounds outside were all part of it. He was standing *inside* the Autumn King's beard.

"You have found my house," thundered the king.

Tom bowed very low, but was careful not to touch his box to the ground.

"And I have found your magnificent beard, and it please your majesty. Or it found me."

"Of old many men came to this place to offer sacrifice, that their harvests might be plentiful, that the autumn would be long and soften the winter, that their fields would remain fertile through the long sleep. And I would touch those fields and spread my beard over them, making them

my own, protecting them from the coming snow."

"Ma-majesty . . . *What* did they offer in sacrifice?"

"Oh, anything. Fruits and nuts. Animals, or sometimes each other. Or just prayers. I didn't really care. I just liked the attention."

"Ah . . ."

"And that box you have there, is it a sacrifice for me?"

Tom hadn't thought of it like that. He wondered what would happen if he gave the box to the king. But he didn't dare find out.

"No, alas, it isn't. You wouldn't like what's inside."

At this the box stirred as if indignant, and almost slipped from Tom's hands. He held onto it so firmly his knuckles went white.

"That's how it is," said the king. "You little folk, you mortals have no respect for your gods anymore."

"Majesty, oh great one, no offense is meant, but these days we worship but one God, for to do more would be . . . pagan."

Suddenly leaves dropped from the ceiling into heaps, surrounding Tom. They rose into fierce-looking guards armed with pointed stakes and clubs.

"Little Man," said the Autumn King grimly, "whether your kind admit it or not, there are still spirits of the seasons, of the forest, of the waters. Long and long ago the eyes of all mortals were open, and they saw these spirits, but of late they have become clouded. Now very few see me, or hear when I call. Only the different ones such as yourself. But being different will not save you. You *will* give me a gift in sacrifice, or else you'll join my kingdom. Do you think I caused you to be brought here for no reason? Look!"

A wall parted, and out came a procession of people, strangers to Tom. Each stared ahead; vacantly. Each bore a paint brush in one hand and a little pot in the other. They shuffled past, smelling of earth, as if they'd lain in it for a long time before being summoned. Some of them, Tom noticed, were skeletal enough that he could see through them.

Twenty or thirty went by, and then came one he recognized. It was Nick. Tom called his name, but he did not answer. For an instant their eyes met, and the look in Nick's was one of hopeless despair. All of his merriment, the very life of him had been stolen away. He was an empty vessel, shuffling with the rest. A soundless message passed between them, as if to say, *Help me Tom. I can't go on like this for ever and ever. I'd rather be in Hell.*

"What . . . ?" gasped Tom. "Why . . . ?" This was impossible. It was ugly and *insane*, which was a species of lunacy he wasn't at all comfortable with.

"Let me answer all your questions," said the king. "Here." He drew a glass bottle out of some fold in his robe. It was clear and stoppered with a cork. Inside hundreds of motes of light drifted, like lethargic fireflies.

**Continued Lunacy 57**

"These are the souls of my subjects. As long as they are here, and not in their bodies, I control both body and soul. Their bodies do not age or die, and their souls do not progress toward eternity. They are mine, all mine. Some have been here for thousands of years. Now, since few men see me or hear me anymore, it is harder for me to add to their number. It is a wonderful gift you have, to be able to see things others don't; but it does have its dangers. Why do I do it? You'll notice that each year, when I come into my power, all the leaves change color. That takes work. Nothing is free in this world. My task it is, my duty and burden, to supply each of my subjects with paintbrush and paint pot, and send them to color all the leaves they can, before winter comes along and ruins everything. They do good work, but I need all the help I can get."

"I can see that. . . ."

"Now then, you have come here because you can perceive my kingdom. Either you shall join it, or do something special for me. It's as simple as that."

"Will you release my friend Nick if I do?"

"For two, it has to be twice as special."

"Then I shall be doubly amusing, Majesty." Again Tom bowed low. This, he knew, was serious business. He wasn't working for pennies or new shoes now.

He sat down on the floor and twiddled his thumbs, staring blankly into space.

"Well, get on with it!" cried the king. "We are not amused!"

"I am mad, sir, lord, great king; and I can't do anything too sensible, lest I lose hold of myself. Alas, if you insist!" He got up on his hands, the way Nick always did, and ran around the room, crashing into several of the leaf guards, reducing them to heaps. He held the carved box in his teeth. Then he flipped over, and sat again, twiddling his thumbs. Slowly the leaf men reformed themselves. A minute passed, two. The king began to fidget. He was about to signal his guards when Tom began to sing. He sang all of his famous song, about himself, about Mad Maudlin, the Knight of Ghosts and Shadows, the visit to Satan's kitchen and what he ate there (and how well it was done, and what sort of seasoning was used), and even the story of the crocodile. He wished he knew some of the stories told to the Holy Ancestral Crocodile over the eons, but he didn't and had to make them up:

How Lledennyachllyl Vnarghullew created the world in six days, one ahead of Jehovah, and would have gotten the upper hand if only his children could have called out his name before Adam and Eve called out the other one. Unfortunately there were no Welshmen present, and nobody could pronounce it.

How the world was wrought in four days by an obese fellow with an extra eyeball in his navel, who then placed it on the back of a turtle. But

the turtle heard so much about the marvels above him that he came out to have a look, then concluded that so massive a thing could never be supported by an empty turtle shell. He was right.

(There were forty-six creation stories, all of them different. "Collect the whole series," said Tom.)

How Delicious Donald the farmer opened a pea pod and found a beautiful maiden inside. By magic she shrunk him down, and they moved in, and lived happily until his shrewish wife made soup out of the pod. He was awarded his name posthumously.

("The best so far," said the crocodile, who was listening in.)

How Tedi- of Thebes was sent by his king to slay the Stymphalian Bore; how the two met and got along splendidly. (It was a long story, involving lots of ants and a granary. Tom abridged it.)

How the wizard Etelven Thios was murdered, and came back again, and was murdered, and came back, again and again, each time in diminished condition, until he grew, on his last victim as a hangnail. And still won out.

How the Russo-Saxon warrior Hrothgarovitch Hngrotwitheowfnongfnongski met the Welshman who would have made a creation's worth of difference if he'd just opened his mouth at the right moment, and battled him to the death polysyllabically.

Of folk marvelously disfigured, that do have their heads beneath their shoulders, and what their table manners are like. (Awful.)

Of the old woman who opened her ragged cloak at sunset to release a black bird from within, and another, and another, until the sky was made dark and she had diminished into a pile of old clothes.

(There were a hundred and fourteen stories of the world's odd folk, only half of them Tom's autobiography.)

And so on. He told mermaid stories and monster stories, tales of shipwrecks and ghosts and cyclopes and crocodiles ("At last, I get some recognition!" hissed the crocodile.) and heroic thrilling sagas and heart-throbbing tragedy (but the Autumn King's heart, being made of leaves, did not throb) and warm domestic comedy (the warmest involving houses burning down), the old yarn about the back street knee-deep in blood (an alley gory), and the one about the Ghost Goat Man of Alexandria, who herded his phantom charges through the great library, where they devoured only bad books, becoming the world's first literary critics and relegating the tale of their own existence to oral tradition.

And so on.

And more.

Many in rhyme.

"You know," said the Autumn King when Tom was done and panting for breath, "if you hadn't become a lunatic, you would have had quite a career as a storyteller. But for me there's just one problem."

**Continued Lunacy 59**



"What's . . . that?" (gasp, pant, wheeze)

"We spirits often lack the finer points of humanity. It probably comes from not having souls."

"And?"

"I have no imagination. I don't like stories. Sorry."

"Then what *does* amuse you?" asked Tom, nearly in despair.

"I don't know really. When I'm alone I dream strange dreams, filled with darkness and dead leaves and the smell of earth, and I don't understand them myself. But no one has ever succeeded in amusing me, try as they may. I'm *sure* I don't like riddles. They always try riddles. The same old routine. You know: what is your name? What is your favorite color? Then some nonsense about African swallows. Nuada! It bores me to tears!"

Tom was almost ready to give up, but there was one last hope. He hoped that the king had an ego. He too would like to be celebrated in song, surely. Tom knew how it felt, so he sang, hoarsely:

*"Oh the Autumn King, his crown  
is of gold, is of gold;  
Red and yellow are his robes  
with each fold;  
And with his breath so cold  
the summer does grow old,  
And the leaves go tumbling down  
to the ground, to the ground.  
The leaves go tumbling down  
to the ground."*

There was silence in the whole forest, and the palace was hushed. The Autumn King smiled broadly, and seemed content.

"Will you release Nick now?" Tom blurted at last.

"No. Now that I have your song, I don't need you to sing it, so I'll keep you both to paint leaves. There is always work to be done."

"You tricked me!"

The king smiled again. "That, I admit, does amuse me. But just a little."

Then he laughed, and his beard shook. The castle trembled. Leaves rained down from the ceiling. Tom felt dry, scratchy hands seize him by the ankles as the leaf level rose like water in the hold of a sinking ship. Then the leaves rose and they had him by the knees, then the waist, and he was caught. He could not budge. Still the king rocked with laughter. Tom recalled the look he'd seen on Nick's face at the last, and never did he know more pitiless terror than at that moment.

It was as the leaves rose to his chin, and he held the carved box he still carried on high, then he realized that, frozen world or no, *nothing* could be worse than what was happening to him just now.

He flung the box in a long arch across the throne room, over the rustling leaves. It landed in the king's lap, but he was too convulsed with laughter to notice, and it fell onto the ground at the foot of the throne. The leaves closed over Tom's eyes at that instant, but he heard a familiar, screeching voice, and there was a flash of blue light. Through the leaves came a blast of frigid wind. Then there were no leaves around him anymore, only snow, an intense whirlwind of a blizzard confined in the tiny space of the room.

"You! You! You!" shrieked Grandmother Grey in the middle of it. "You dare to make my lovely winters mild! You dare to put color into my pretty dead leaves, when it is my task to freeze away all colors except white and grey and corpse-blue! *How dare you?*"

"Just when I have everything painted and right, *you wreck it*, and I have to start all over again!"

Tom caught a glimpse of the two of them wrestling as he fled the hall. The air was filled with flashes of blue and orange light. Snow and leaves and mud pelted him in the face. The walls were collapsing. He ran to the door, pushed, and saw the forest outside, the trees writhing before the sudden wind, leaves ripped from the branches and filling the sky like a cloud of locusts.

Then there was only darkness for a long time. And cold. The Autumn King and the Winter Witch agreed on that much.

The rest is mud. When next Tom was aware, he found himself clawing upward through half-frozen, leafy mud. Other shapes rose around him. He was afraid for a moment that these were things akin to the leaf creatures, but then one of them wiped the slime off its face, blinked, and said, "Hello Tom."

It was Nick, good as new, although much muddier.

("Ah, mud, mud, beautiful mud," said the crocodile. "Home at last, in my warm, soft Nile mud I rest, digesting an antelope and a child. This is the life. Mud is a good place to end a story.")

All those people now returned to mortal life eventually told of their adventures. Some had to learn new languages, since theirs were ancient. Two or three were arrested for paganism while dancing around Stonehenge; but the rest remained, astonished by the changes the world had gone through since whenever.

To tell such a story, much less to have experienced it and to believe it, requires that one be mad, truly so, in the visionary sense.

Ah, and to hear it. That is almost as good. Then to tell it to others . . .

Once again there were lunatics aplenty. There hasn't been a shortage since.

*The author explains that the Tom O'Bedlam series is*

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ultimately derived from an anonymous Elizabethan lyric, "Tom O'Bedlam's Song." "Tom O'Bedlam's Night Out" (Fantastic, Sept. 1977) attempted to explain some of the more famous verses. "Raving Lunacy" (Amazing, July 1981) and the present story delve deeper into the lore of Lunacy. Recommended reading on the subject includes Arthur Machen's Tom O'Bedlam and His Song, the section of "mad songs" in Bishop Percy's Reliques of Ancient English Poetry, "Tom O'Bedlams" in Isaac Disraeli's Curiosities of Literature, not to mention King Lear and The Duchess of Malfi. But it's more than a matter of research, Schweitzer insists. A certain . . . ah . . . affinity for the material.

In his more lucid moments, Schweitzer mentions two books of fantasy fiction out from Starblaze, We Are All Legends and The Shattered Goddess.

## CARTOON



William Rotsler

## CARTOON



Alexis Gilliland

# IN THE ISLANDS

by Pat Murphy

art: Jack Gaughan

*Pat Murphy is a Clarion Workshop alumna who has been selling stories for several years. She mentions just having come back from one archaeological dig and preparing to go off on another. Fortunately, she did not mention the possibility of submitting her next story in cuneiform on clay tables, so we won't either.*

Though the sun was nearly set, Morris wore dark glasses when he met Nick at the tiny dirt runway that served as the Bay Islands' only airport. Nick was flying in from Los Angeles by way of San Pedro Sula in Honduras. He peered through the cracked window of the old DC-3 as the plane bumped to a stop.

Morris stood with adolescent awkwardness by the one-room wooden building that housed Customs for the Islands. Morris: dark, curly hair, red baseball cap pulled low over mirrored sunglasses, long-sleeved shirt with torn-out elbows, jeans with ragged cuffs.

A laughing horde of young boys ran out to the plane and grabbed dive bags and suitcases to carry to Customs. With the exception of Nick, the passengers were scuba divers, bound for Anthony's Cay resort on the far side of Roatan, the main island in the group.

Nick met Morris halfway to the Customs building, handed him a magazine, and said only, "Take a look at page fifty."

The article was titled "The Physiology and Ecology of a New Species of Flashlight Fish," by Nicholas C. Rand and Morris Morgan.

Morris studied the article for a moment, flipping through the pages and ignoring the young boys who swarmed past, carrying suitcases almost too large for them to handle. Morris looked up at Nick and grinned — a flash of white teeth in a thin, tanned face. "Looks good," he said. His voice was a little hoarser than Nick had remembered.

"For your first publication, it's remarkable." Nick patted Morris's shoulder awkwardly. Nick looked and acted older than his thirty-five years. At the University, he treated his colleagues with distant courtesy and had no real friends. He was more comfortable with Morris than with anyone else he knew.

"Come on," Morris said. "We got to get your gear and go." He tried to sound matter-of-fact, but he betrayed his excitement by slipping into the dialect of the Islands — an archaic English spoken with a strange lilt and governed by rules all its own.

Nick tipped the youngster who had hauled his bags to Customs and waited behind the crowd of divers. The inspector looked at Nick,

stamped his passport, and said, "Go on. Have a good stay." Customs inspections on the Islands tended to be perfunctory. Though the Bay Islands were governed by Honduras, the Islanders tended to follow their own rules. The Bay Islands lay off the coast of Honduras in the area of the Caribbean that had once been called the Spanish Main. The population was an odd mix: native Indians, relocated slaves called Caribs, and descendants of the English pirates who had used the Islands as home base.

The airport's runway stretched along the shore and the narrow, sandy beach formed one of its edges. Morris had beached his skiff at one end of the landing strip.

"I got a new skiff, a better one," Morris said. "If the currents be with us, we'll be in East Harbor in two hours, I bet."

They loaded Nick's gear and pushed off. Morris piloted the small boat. He pulled his cap low over his eyes to keep the wind from catching it and leaned a little into the wind. Nick noticed Morris's hand on the tiller; webbing stretched between the fingers. It seemed to Nick that the webbing extended further up each finger than it had when Nick had left the Islands four months before.

Dolphins came from nowhere to follow the boat, riding the bow wave and leaping and splashing alongside. Nick sat in the bow and watched Morris. The boy was intent on piloting the skiff. Behind him, dolphins played and the wake traced a white line through the silvery water. The dolphins darted away, back to the open sea, as the skiff approached East Harbor.

The town stretched along the shore for about a mile: a collection of brightly-painted houses on stilts, a grocery store, a few shops. The house that Nick had rented was on the edge of town.

Morris docked neatly at the pier near the house, and helped Nick carry his dive bag and luggage to the house. "There's beer in the icebox," Morris said. "Cold."

Nick got two beers. He returned to the front porch. Morris was sitting on the railing, staring out into the street. Though the sun was down and twilight was fading fast, Morris wore his sunglasses still. Nick sat on the rail beside the teenager. "So what have you been doing since I left?"

Morris grinned. He took off his sunglasses and tipped back his cap. Nick could see his eyes — wide and dark and filled with repressed excitement. "I'm going," Morris said. "I'm going to sea."

Nick took a long drink from his beer and wiped his mouth. He had known this was coming, known it for a long time.

"My dad, he came to the harbor; and we swam together. I'll be going with him soon. Look." Morris held up one hand. The webbing between his fingers stretched from the base almost to the tip of each finger. The light from the overhead bulb shone through the thin skin. "I'm changing,



Nick. It's almost time."

"What does your mother say of this?"

"My mum? Nothing." His excitement was spilling over. He laid a hand on Nick's arm, and his touch was cold. "I'm going, Nick."

Ten years ago, Nick had been diving at night off Middle Cay, a small coral island not far from East Harbor. He had been diving alone at night to study the nighttime ecology of the reef. Even at age twenty-five, Nick had possessed a curiosity stronger than his sense of self-preservation.

The reef changed with the dying of the light. Different fishes came out of hiding; different invertebrates prowled the surface of the coral. Nick was particularly interested in the flashlight fish, a small fish that glowed in the dark. Beneath each eye, the flashlight fish had an organ filled with bioluminescent bacteria, which gave off a cold green light. They were elusive fish, living in deep waters and rising up to the reef only when the moon was new and the night was dark.

At night, sharks came in from the open sea to prowl the reef. Nick did not care to study them, but sometimes they came to study him. He carried a flashlight in one hand, a shark billy in the other. Usually, the sharks were only curious. Usually, they circled once, then swam away.

On that night ten years before, the grey reef shark that circled him twice did not seem to understand this. Nick could see the flat black eye, dispassionately watching him. The shark turned to circle again, turning with a grace that made its movement seem leisurely. It came closer; and Nick thought, even as he swam for the surface, about what an elegant machine it was. He had dissected sharks and admired the way their muscles worked so tirelessly and their teeth were arranged so efficiently.

He met the shark with a blow of the billy, a solid blow, but the explosive charge in the tip of the club failed. The charges did fail, as often as not. But worse: the shark twisted back. As he struck at it again, the billy slipped from his hand, caught in an eddy of water. He snatched at it and watched it tumble away, with the maddening slowness of objects underwater.

The shark circled wide, then came in again: elegant, efficient, deadly.

The shadow that intercepted the shark was neither elegant nor efficient. In the beam of the flashlight, Nick could see him clearly: a small boy dressed in ragged shorts and armed with a shark billy. This one exploded when he struck the shark, and the animal turned with grace and speed to cruise away, heading for the far side of the reef. The boy grinned at Nick and glided away into the darkness. Nick saw five lines on each side of the boy's body — five gill slits that opened and closed and opened and closed.

Nick hauled himself into the boat. He lay on his back and looked at the stars. At night, the world underwater often seemed unreal. He looked at



the stars and told himself that over and over.

When Nick was in the Islands, Morris usually slept on the porch of whatever house Nick had rented. Nick slept on a bed inside.

Nick was tired from a long day of travel. He slept and he came upon the forbidden dreams with startling urgency and a kind of relief. It was only a dream, he told himself. Darkness covered his sins.

He dreamed that Morris lay on a dissecting table, asleep, his webbed hands quiet at his sides. Morris's eyes had no lashes; his nose was flat and broad; his face was thin and triangular — too small for his eyes. He's not human, Nick thought, not human at all.

Nick took the scalpel in his hand and drew it through the top layers of skin and muscle alongside the five gill slits on Morris's right side. There was little blood. Later, he would use the bone shears to cut through the ribs to examine the internal organs. Now, he just laid back the skin and muscle to expose the intricate structure of the gills.

Morris did not move. Nick looked at the teenager's face and realized suddenly that Morris was not asleep. He was dead. For a moment, Nick felt a tremendous sense of loss; but he pushed the feeling away. He felt hollow, but he fingered the feathery tissue of the gills and planned the rest of the dissection.

He woke to the palm fronds rattling outside his window and the warm morning breeze drying the sweat on his face. The light of dawn — already bright and strong — shone in the window.

Morris was not on the porch. His baseball cap hung from a nail beside the hammock.

Nick made breakfast from the provisions that Morris had left him: fried eggs, bread, milk. In mid-morning, he strolled to town.

Morris's mother, Margarite, ran a small shop in the living room of her home, selling black-coral jewelry to tourists. The black coral came from deep waters; Morris brought it to her.

Two women — off one of the sailing yachts anchored in the harbor — were bargaining with Margarite for black-coral earrings. Nick waited for them to settle on a price and leave. They paid for the jewelry and stepped back out into the street, glancing curiously at Nick.

"Where's Morris?" he said to Margarite. He leaned on the counter and looked into her dark eyes. She was a stocky woman with skin the color of coffee with a little cream. She wore a flowered dress, hemmed modestly just below her knees.

He had wondered at times what this dark-eyed woman thought of her son. She did not speak much, and he had sometimes suspected that she was slow-witted. He wondered how it had happened that this stocky woman had found an alien lover on a beach, had made love with such a stranger, had given birth to a son who fit nowhere at all.

"Morris — he has gone to sea," she said. "He goes to sea these days." She began rearranging the jewelry that had been jumbled by the tourists.

"When will he be back?" Nick asked.

She shrugged. "Maybe never."

"Why do you say that?" His voice was sharp, sharper than he intended. She did not look up from the tray. He reached across the counter and took her hand in a savage grip. "Look at me. Why do you say that?"

"He will be going to sea," she said softly. "He must. He belongs there."

"He will come to say goodbye," Nick said.

She twisted her hand in his grip, but he held her tightly. "His dad never said goodbye," she said softly.

Nick let her hand go. He rarely lost his temper and he knew he was not really angry with this woman, but with himself. He turned away without saying goodbye.

He strolled down the dirt lane that served as East Harbor's main street. He nodded to an old man who sat on his front porch, greeted a woman who was hanging clothes on a line. The day was hot and still.

He was a stranger here; he would always be a stranger here. He did not know what the Islanders thought of him, what they thought of Morris and Margarite. Morris had told him that they knew of the water-dwellers and kept their secret. "They live by the sea," Morris had said. "If they talk too much, their nets will rip and their boats sink. They don't tell."

Nick stopped by the grocery store on the far edge of town. A ramshackle pier jutted into the sea right beside the store.

Ten years before, the pier had been in better repair. Nick had been in town to pick up supplies. For a month, he was renting a skiff and a house on Middle Cay and studying the reef.

The sun had reached the horizon, and its light made a silver path on the water. Somewhere, far off, he could hear the laughter and shouting of small boys. At the end of the pier, a kid in a red baseball cap was staring out to sea.

Nick bought two Cokes from the grocery — cold from the icebox behind the counter. He carried them out to the pier. The old boards creaked beneath his feet, but the boy did not look up.

"Have a Coke," Nick said.

The boy's face was dirty. His dark eyes were too large for his face. He wore a red kerchief around his neck, ragged shorts, and a shirt that gaped open where the second button should have been. He accepted the Coke and took his first swig without saying anything.

Nick studied his face for a moment, comparing this face to the one that he remembered. A strange kind of calmness took hold of him. "You shouldn't go diving at night," he said. "You're too young to risk your life

with sharks."

The boy grinned and took another swig of Coke.

"That was you, wasn't it?" Nick asked. He sat beside the kid on the dock, his legs dangling over the water. "That was you." His voice was steady.

"Aye." The boy looked at Nick with dark, grave eyes. "That was me."

The part of Nick's mind that examined information and accepted or rejected it took this in and accepted it. That part of him had never believed that the kid was a dream, never believed that the shark was imaginary.

"What's your name?"

"Morris."

"I'm Nick." They shook hands and Nick noticed the webbing between the boy's fingers — from the base of the finger to the first joint.

"You're a marine biologist?" asked the kid. His voice was a little too deep for him, a little rough, as if he found speaking difficult.

"Yes."

"What was you doing, diving out there at night?"

"I was watching the fish. I want to know what happens on the reef at night." He shrugged. "Sometimes I am too curious for my own good."

The boy watched him with dark, brooding eyes. "My dad, he says I should have let the shark have you. He says you will tell others."

"I haven't said anything to anyone," Nick protested.

The boy took another swig of Coke, draining the bottle. He set the bottle carefully on the dock, one hand still gripping it. He studied Nick's face. "You must promise you will never tell." He tilted back his baseball cap and continued to study Nick's face. "I will show you things you has got no chance of finding without me." The boy spoke with quiet confidence and Nick found himself nodding. "You know those little fish you want to find — the ones that glow?" He grinned when Nick looked surprised and said, "The Customs man said you were looking for them. I has been to a place where you can find them every new moon. And I has found a kind that aren't in the books."

"What do you know about what's in the books?"

Morris shrugged, a smooth, fluid motion. "I read the books. I has got to know about these things." He held out his hand for Nick to shake. "You promise?"

Nick hesitated, then put his hand in the kid's hand. "I promise." He would have promised more than that to learn about this kid.

"I has a skiff much better than that," Morris said, jerking his head contemptuously toward the skiff that Nick had been using. "I'll be at Middle Cay tomorrow."

Morris showed up at Middle Cay and took Nick to places that he never would have found. Morris read all Nick's reference books with great

interest.

And the webbing between his fingers kept growing.

Nick bought a cold Coke in the grocery store and strolled back to his house. Morris was waiting on the porch, sitting on the rail and reading their article in the magazine.

"I brought lobsters for dinner," he said. Small scratching noises came from the covered wooden crate at his feet. He thumped on it with his heel, and the noises stopped for a moment, then began again.

"Where have you been?"

"Out to the Hog Islands. Fishing mostly. I spend most of the days underwater now." He looked at Nick but his eyes were concealed by the mirrored glasses. "When you left, I could only stay under for a few hours. Now, there doesn't seem to be a limit. And the sun burns me if I'm out too much."

Nick caught himself studying the way Morris was holding the magazine. The webbing between his fingers tucked neatly out of the way. It should not work, he thought. This being that is shaped like a man and swims like a fish. But bumblebees can't fly, by logical reasoning.

"What do you think of the article?" Nick asked.

"Good, as far as it goes. Could say more. I've been watching them, and they seem to signal to each other. There's different patterns for the males and females. I've got notes on it all. I'll show you. The water temperature seems to affect them too."

Nick was thinking how painful this curiosity of his was. It had always been so. He wanted to know; he wanted to understand. He had taken Morris's temperature; he had listened to Morris's heartbeat and monitored its brachycardia when Morris submerged. He had monitored the oxygen levels in the blood, observed Morris's development. But there was so much more to learn. He had been hampered by his own lack of background — he was a biologist, not a doctor. There were tests he could not perform without harming Morris. And he had not wanted to hurt Morris. No, he did not want to hurt Morris.

"I'll leave all my notes on your desk," Morris was saying. "You should take a look before I go."

Nick frowned. "You'll be able to come back," he said. "Your father comes in to see you. You'll come back and tell me what you've seen, won't you?"

Morris set the magazine on the rail beside him and pushed his cap back. The glasses hid his eyes. "The ocean will change me," he said. "I may not remember the right things to tell you. My father thinks deep, wet thoughts; and I don't always understand him." Morris shrugged. "I will change."

"I thought you wanted to be a biologist. I thought you wanted to learn.

And here you are, saying that you'll change and forget all this." Nick's voice was bitter.

"I has got no choice. It's time to go." Nick could not see his eyes or interpret his tone. "I don't belong on the land anymore. I don't belong here."

Nick found that he was gripping the rail as he leaned against it. He could learn so much from Morris. So much. "Why do you think you'll belong there. You won't fit there, with your memories of the islands. You won't belong."

Morris took off his glasses and looked at Nick with dark, wet eyes. "I'll belong. I has got to belong. I'm going."

The lobsters scratched inside their box. Morris replaced his sunglasses and thumped lightly on the lid again. "We should make dinner," he said. "They're getting restless."

During the summer on Middle Cay, Nick and Morris had become friends. Nick came to rely on Morris's knowledge of the reef. Morris lived on the island and seemed to find there a security he needed. His curiosity about the sea matched Nick's.

Early each evening, just after sunset, they would sit on the beach and talk — about the reef, about life at the University, about marine biology, and — more rarely — about Morris and his father.

Morris could say very little about his father. "My dad told me legends," Morris said to Nick, "but that's all. The legends say that the water people came down from the stars. They came a long time ago." Nick was watching Morris and the boy was digging his fingers in the sand, as if searching for something to grasp.

"What do you think?" Nick asked him.

Morris shrugged. "Doesn't really matter. I think they must be native to this world or they couldn't breed with humans." He sifted the beach sand with his webbed hands. "But it doesn't much matter. I'm here. And I'm not human." He looked at Nick with dark, lonely eyes.

Nick had wanted to reach across the sand and grasp the cold hand that kept sifting the sand, digging and sifting the sand. He had wanted to say something comforting. But he had remained silent, giving the boy only the comfort of his company.

Nick lay on his cot, listening to the sounds of the evening. He could hear his neighbor's chickens, settling down to rest. He could hear the evening wind in the palms. He wanted to sleep, but he did not want to dream.

Once Morris was gone, he would not come back, Nick thought. If only Nick could keep him here.

Nick started to drift to sleep and caught himself on the brink of a

dream. His hands had been closing on Morris's throat. Somehow, in that moment, his hands were not his own. They were his father's hands: cool, clean, brutally competent. His father, a high school biology teacher with a desire to be more, had taught him how to pith a frog, how to hold it tight and insert the long pin at the base of the skull. "It's just a frog," his father had said. His father's hands were closing on Morris's throat and Nick was thinking, I could break his neck — quickly and painlessly. After all, he's not human.

Nick snapped awake and clasped his hands as if that might stop them from doing harm. He was shivering in the warm night. He sat up on the edge of the bed, keeping his hands locked together. He stepped out onto the porch where Morris was sleeping.

Morris was gone; the hammock was empty. Nick looked out over the empty street and let his hands relax. He returned to his bed and dozed off, but his sleep was disturbed by voices that blended with the evening wind. He could hear his former wife's bitter voice speaking over the sound of the wind. She said, "I'm going. You don't love me, you just want to analyze me. I'm going." He could hear his father, droning on about how the animal felt no pain, how it was all in the interest of science. At last he sank into a deeper sleep, but in the morning he did not want to remember his dreams.

Morris was still gone when Nick finished breakfast. He read over Morris's notes. They were thorough and carefully taken. Nick made notes for another paper on the flashlight fish, a paper on which Morris would be senior author.

Morris returned late in the afternoon. Nick looked up from his notes, looked into Morris's mirrored eyes, and thought of death. And tried not to think of death.

"I thought we could go to Middle Cay for dinner," Morris said. "I has got conch and shrimp. We can take the camp stove and fix them there."

Nick tapped his pencil against the pad nervously. "Yes. Let's do that."

Morris piloted the skiff to Middle Cay. Through the water, Nick could see the reef that ringed the island — shades of blue and green beneath the water. The reef was broken by channels here and there; Morris followed the main channel nearly to the beach, then cut the engine and let the skiff drift in.

They set up the camp stove in a level spot, sheltered by the trunk of a fallen palm tree. Morris cracked the conch and pounded it and threw it in the pan with shrimp. They drank beer while the combination cooked. They ate from tin cups, leaning side by side against the fallen palm.

"You can keep the skiff for yourself," Morris said suddenly. "I think that you can use it."

Nick looked at him, startled.

"I left my notes on your desk," Morris said. "They be as clear as I can

make them."

Nick was studying his face. "I will go tonight," Morris said. "My dad will come here to meet me." The sun had set and the evening breeze was kicking up waves in the smooth water. He drained his beer and set the bottle down beside the stove.

Morris stood and took off his shirt, slipped out of his pants. The gill slits made stripes that began just below his ribcage and ended near his hips. He was more muscular than Nick remembered. He stepped toward the water.

"Wait," Nick said. "Not yet."

"Got to." Morris turned to look at Nick. "There's a mask and fins in the skiff. Come with me for a ways."

Morris swam ahead, following the channel out. Nick followed in mask and fins. The twilight had faded. The water was dark and its surface shone silver. The night did not seem real. The darkness made it dream-like. The sound of Nick's feet breaking the water's surface was too loud. The touch of the water against his skin was too warm. Morris swam just ahead, just out of reach.

Nick wore his dive knife at his belt. He always wore his dive knife at his belt. As he swam, he noticed that he was taking his knife out and holding it ready. It was a heavy knife, designed for prying rocks apart and cracking conch. It would work best as a club, he was thinking. A club to be used for a sudden sharp blow from behind. That might be enough. If he called to Morris, then Morris would stop and Nick could catch him.

But his voice was not cooperating. Not yet. His hands held the knife ready, but he could not call out. Not yet.

He felt the change in water temperature as they passed into deeper water. He felt something — a swirl of water against his legs — as if something large were swimming past.

Morris disappeared from the water ahead of him. The water was smooth, with no sign of Morris's bobbing head. "Morris," Nick called. "Morris."

He saw them then. Dim shapes beneath the water. Morris: slim, almost human. His father: man-shaped, but different. His arms were the wrong shape; his legs were too thick and muscular.

Morris was close enough to touch, but Nick did not strike. When Morris reached out and touched Nick's hand with a cold, gentle touch, Nick released the knife and let it fall, watched it tumble toward the bottom.

Morris's father turned in the water to look up at Nick and Nick read nothing in those inhuman eyes: cold, dark, dispassionate. Black and uncaring as the eyes of a shark. Nick saw Morris swim down and touch his father's shoulder, urging him away into the darkness.

"Morris!" Nick called, knowing Morris could not hear him. He kicked



with frantic energy, not caring that his knife was gone. He did not want to stop Morris. He wanted to go with Morris and swim with the dolphins and explore the sea.

There was darkness below him — cool, deep water. He could feel the tug of the currents. He swam, not conserving his energy, not caring. His kicks grew weaker. He looked down into the world of darkness and mystery and he sank below the surface almost gladly.

He felt a cold arm around his shoulders. He coughed up water when the arm dragged him to the surface. He coughed, took a breath that was half water, half air, coughed again. Dark water surged against his mask each time the arm dragged him forward. He choked and struggled, but the arm dragged him on.

One flailing leg bumped against coral, then against sand. Sand scraped against his back as he was dragged up the beach. His mask was ripped away and he turned on his side to retch and cough up sea water.

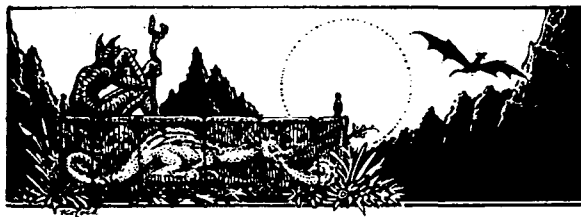
Morris squatted beside him with one cold webbed hand still on his shoulder. Nick focussed on Morris's face and on the black eyes that seemed as remote as mirrored lenses. "Goodbye, Nick," Morris said. His voice was a hoarse whisper. "Goodbye."

Morris's hand lingered on Nick's shoulder for an instant. Then the young man stood and walked back to the sea.

Nick lay on his back and looked up at the stars. After a time, he breathed more easily. He picked up Morris's cap from where it lay on the beach and turned it in his hands, in a senseless repetitive motion.

He crawled further from the water and lay his head against the fallen log. He gazed at the stars and the sea, and thought about how he could write down his observations of Morris's departure and Morris's father. No. He could not write it down, could not pin it down with words. He did not need to write it down.

He put on the red baseball cap and pulled it low over his eyes. When he slept, with his head propped against the log, he dreamed only of the deep night that lay beneath the silver surface of the sea.



# AN INTERVIEW WITH A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

by Darrell Schweitzer

A. Bertram Chandler is probably the best known Australian science fiction writer. He is British by birth, but has resided in Australia for many years. As should be obvious to anyone who reads one of his stories, Chandler has had much experience at sea. He has served in the British, Australian, and New Zealand merchant navies, and has consistently made use of this background in his stories and novels, notably the Rim Worlds/John Grimes series. He began writing for John W. Campbell's *Astounding* during World War II and was a regular contributor to the early *New Worlds*. His novels began to appear in the late 1950s and have been doing so regularly ever since. He retired from the sea in 1975, and has been able to devote more time to writing as a consequence. Ace Books has recently begun to reissue the Grimes series in chronological order, two novels to a volume. His most recent novel is *Mattilda's Stepchildren*.

**Q:** Why did you turn to science fiction, rather than sea stories?

**Chandler:** Because many years ago, I was accused by the late John Campbell of writing sea stories thinly disguised as science fiction. Which I think I do.

**Q:** What do you see as the similarities between life in an ocean-going vessel and life in a spaceship?

**Chandler:** It was many years ago, in fact during World War II, that Heinlein said that only people who know ships can write convincingly about spaceships. And I think it is largely true that one finds an author with no

sea experience tends to man his spaceships with hordes of useless ratings falling over each other. He hasn't the faintest idea about ship's routine or organization. Now essentially, a spaceship, the real spaceship of the future, as opposed to our present puddle-jumpers, will be like a surface ship of today inasmuch as she will be going a long way in a long time, and inasmuch as the crew will have just one thin sheet of metal between them and eternity.

**Q:** Then isn't it much closer to a submarine?

**Chandler:** Actually, the submarine is a spaceship, because you have human beings inside a metal-shell, living and working in an utterly hostile environment.

**Q:** What drew you to science fiction originally?

**Chandler:** Science fiction is something — the talent for it and the liking for it — that you're born with. A few people acquire the taste in later years, but most of us, I think, were actually born science fictioners, either as readers or as writers.

**Q:** When did you get started? The earliest story of yours that I've seen was "Giant Killer," in a 1945 *Astounding*.

**Chandler:** I think my earliest story was about 1942 or 1943. It was written shortly after the USA entered World War II. At the time I was an officer in one of the leading English liner companies. The normal peacetime trade was between England and Australasia. And with World War II, we were shunted off our normal tramlines, and so I paid my first visit to New York. In

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New York, I thought that I would like to meet the editor of what was then my favorite magazine, *Astounding Science Fiction*. So I went trotting around to the sacred edifice, and was ushered into the sacred presence, and John said that because of the war, with so many of his authors being involved in military service, he was very short of stories, and perhaps, as a faithful reader, I might oblige. And the next time in New York I had with me the manuscript of a very short story, which I'd hammered out painfully over about a fortnight. The same thing today would have taken on the outside two mornings' work, or working right through, a day's work. So I presented this precious opus to John in person, and said, "Well I suppose I'd better leave return postage," and he said, "Don't worry. I'll send it back." The ship proceeded back to the U.K. in a very slow convoy, and among the mail awaiting me was not the return manuscript, but a check. And so, for the remaining years of World War II, I was writing short stories practically exclusively for *Astounding*. Then there were a few rejects which I was able to sell to the other magazines in the field. During my career I have had very few short stories or novels which have failed to sell to somebody sometime. I've been very lucky.

**Q:** Did Campbell give you story ideas the way he did to a lot of other writers?

**Chandler:** To take one example, the story "Giant Killer," which by rather too many people is regarded as a sort of classic: I got the idea because at the time I was second mate of a steamer which was infested with rats. In fact it was so bad that they used to keep a .22 rifle on the bridge, so that on moonlit nights the officer on watch could amuse himself potting at rats. So I got the idea of "Giant Killer," and the first

version was called "Derelict." It was written from the viewpoint of the crew of a ship which finds this derelict adrift in space and on boarding her finds that she is infested with mutated rats. John read this and said, "Well, no, no, no. It's your story, and I want you to write it, and I want it my way. Try it again from the viewpoint of the original crew." I am very sorry that the carbon copies of the second version have long been lost. That was a real boot. It was called "The Rejected," the title coming from *The International*: "Arise ye starving from your slumbers, Arise rejected of the earth." It had a Russian spaceship, and I stressed the irony of this crowd of mutinous mutants seething under the comrades' feet. The atmosphere was simply lovely. There were portraits of the Little Red Father, red plush frames. There was even sex, which for those days was rather unusual. And John read this masterpiece and said, "Chandler, I would point out to you that *Astounding Science Fiction* is neither *Thrilling Romances*, nor a monthly edition of *The Daily Worker*. Take it away and do it again from the viewpoint of the rats." And I said, "What?" And he said, "Yes, you heard me." So next time in New York, I had the first thousand words of "Giant Killer." By that time I was a regular weekend guest at John's house parties, and at this one there were present George O. Smith, Ted Sturgeon, and Lester del Rey. And so I passed around the pages of the first thousand words, and everybody asked where the rest was, and I said, "This is all there is unless John says that he'll buy it." And so John said that he would buy it when it was finished, and that was it.

**Q:** Which version do you prefer?

**Chandler:** Actually "Giant Killer" is a very good story, but I would have loved to have seen the second one in

print. Now probably if I read it today I would think that it was horribly over-written. It probably was, too.

**Q:** Did you ever find it restricting when Campbell wanted it done his way?

**Chandler:** I think that among authors of my age group, the majority of us think that Campbell was God. There were only a few who had rather unkind words to say regarding him. But John's judgements were very sound, and his recommendations were certainly well worth following.

**Q:** Eventually you did drift away from him. Why was this?

**Chandler:** I'd say one reason was that in those days for some obscure reason Street & Smith [The publishers of *Astounding*] insisted on buying all rights, and if one sold to Street & Smith, it meant the story was frozen; whereas if I sold the original to one of the other magazines in New York, I could send one carbon to a magazine in England and another to one in Australia. In fact in the case of "Giant Killer," because my agent omitted to get the rights back from Street & Smith, the story has been anthologized three times, and I've only been paid once, and the only reason I was paid was because the person doing the anthology approached me first.

**Q:** Eventually you got into novels. Did you ever sell novels to *Astounding*?

**Chandler:** *The Rim of Space* appeared in *Astounding* as "To Run The Rim." The novel version was an expansion. And *The Ship From Outside* appeared there as "The Outsiders" and was also expanded. But I've never actually had a full-length novel published in *Astounding*.

**Q:** Have you found any other editor to be as helpful as Campbell was?

**Chandler:** I don't think so. I'd say actually that the circumstance was that

I had Campbell when I was just beginning, and since then, with other editors, I've been large enough to stand on my own feet.

**Q:** In other words they take what you give them rather than tell you what they want?

**Chandler:** I've had occasional arguments, but I've usually won.

**Q:** Do you miss this interaction with the editor as the story is actually being written? Would you still find it useful?

**Chandler:** As long as it's a good editor, as Campbell was, but now and again one strikes editors who can be described only as officious. Officious editing is very annoying. You may recall that during the reign of a certain person, who shall be nameless, in the editorial chair of *Galaxy*, every writer was screaming to high heaven about the way in which their stories had been mangled. It wasn't Fred Pohl. He was a very good editor. It wasn't Jim Baen either, so [laughs] you can sort of bracket, one short and one over, and you've got what comes between. He was utterly a pain in the ass.

**Q:** Do you want to be quoted saying that?

**Chandler:** Yes. [Laughs.] I actually fell out with him over a short story, which was later expanded into a full-length novel, *The Broken Cycle*, which was published by Robert Hale in 1975 and by DAW in 1979. At the time I had running concurrently in *Galaxy* what was in effect two series. There was the young Mr. Grimes in the Survey Service. At the time of *The Broken Cycle*, he was Lt. Commander. And there was the somewhat elderly Commodore Grimes of the Rim Worlds. And in *The Broken Cycle* Lt. Commander Grimes of the Survey Service has an affair with a policewoman. This editor objected because Grimes must be unfaithful to the beautiful Sonja. So

I wrote a rather sarcastic letter pointing out that there was a big difference between a Lt. Commander in one service, two and half rungs up, and a commodore in another service with one broad band, and that Sonja was still very far in Lt. Commander Grimes' future. I explained naval ranks in great detail, and I pointed out that even Hornblower was unfaithful to his Lady Barbara and that even Lady Barbara herself had a roll in the hay with some Austrian count in Vienna. I fear that I was too sarcastic, so I never sold another thing to *Galaxy* until there was a change of editor.

**Q:** Has your approach to writing changed over the years?

**Chandler:** Well, ever since he took charge, Grimes has been, as it were, my mouthpiece. We share the same biases, the same likes and dislikes, the same views.

**Q:** You mention that he 'took charge.' Did you originally plan to write this many Grimes stories, or did the series just grow?

**Chandler:** Actually, Grimes started as a very, very minor background character, and then, for some reason, in *Into The Alternate Universe*, I decided that Grimes should have a novel all to his little self. It was since then that he started to really take charge. Then there has been some confusion, because having established Grimes as a fairly senior officer, I did the same as Forrester did with Hornblower. I thought, well, the man must have some background, and I went back in time to chronicle the adventures and misadventures and misdeeds of earlier days. The first of those novels was *The Road to the Rim*, in which Grimes is just starting his career in the Survey Services. And then I had, as I said, the two series running concurrently. I'd write a Survey Services when I felt like it, and

a Rim Worlds Grimes when I felt like it, and then readers started complaining about the great gap between the two Grimeses. Why did Grimes leave the Survey Service? I was hinting now and again that there had been some really outrageous misadventure which led to his being emptied out. So I wrote *The Big Black Mark*, which I thought filled the gap. Then the various readers screamed that the gap had not been filled. So I am still trying to fill that gap. The more I write to fill the gap, the more it stretches.

**Q:** Do you see yourself writing Grimes indefinitely?

**Chandler:** Yes. But apart from everything else, the only publisher who has insisted in having things in their proper order has been Hayakawa Shobo in Tokyo, and the series has such a big following in Japan, that if I dropped Grimes or killed him off, there would be the most dreadful screams.

**Q:** Is it true that none of the Grimes books have been published in Australia?

**Chandler:** None have as books. In the last two Paul Collins anthologies, there was "Grimes Among the Gourmets" [*Other Worlds*, Void Pubs., 1978] and in the one following [*Alien Worlds*, 1979] there were several excerpts from *Matilda's Stepchildren*, which has yet to be accepted by any publisher in the USA, although it's been published in London and Tokyo.

**Q:** Are the stories not popular in Australia, or is there not much of a science-fiction publishing industry there?

**Chandler:** There is not much of a publishing industry period. The only two novels I have had published in Australia have been *False Fatherland*, which has been published by Horwitz, and with the title changed, published as a serial by *Fantastic* in the USA [As *Spartan Planet* March-May 1968] and then by Dell and later by Ace — and of

course the money made by the American and Japanese sales was far in excess of the money made on the Australian sale — and the other one was a rather good novel, very well reviewed, which was an absolute flop from the financial viewpoint, *The Bitter Pill*, published by Wren in 1974.

**Q:** *The Bitter Pill* was much different from what you usually write. Do you think that the failure was because the readers were expecting Grimes?

**Chandler:** Actually, what I think is that if Dennis Wren had published the damn thing in a soft cover, it would have sold much better.

**Q:** What are your writing methods like?

**Chandler:** When I'm driven to it by hunger. . . . Well, actually, with a novel, I have a good idea of the beginning, and I know the end toward which I am working, and what happens in between is anybody's business.

**Q:** You come upon it as you're writing it?

**Chandler:** For the last one I sold, *The Star Loot*, upcoming from Daw, as an experiment I used the *I-Ching* as a plotting machine. It worked quite well.

**Chandler:** Did you toss coins or the little sticks?

**Chandler:** Coins.

**Q:** How do you plot with something like that? I'd think it would tend to randomize things.

**Chandler:** You toss the coins, and get an idea as to the course of action, carry on until you grind to a halt, then toss the coins again. The results were quite satisfactory.

**Q:** Are you going to do it that way again?

**Chandler:** I might. No, actually, the book which I am working on now, *To Rule the Refugees*, is based closely on the Rum Rebellion in New South Wales, just like *The Big Black Mark* is

based very closely on the mutiny aboard the *Bounty*. In each case, Grimes plays the part of Bligh, and so this new one is based very closely on when Captain Bligh was governor of New South Wales and was mutinied against by his garrison.

**Q:** To be mutinied against twice, he must have been doing something wrong.

**Chandler:** No, he wasn't. Bligh, throughout his career, was an outstanding seaman and navigator, and in each case he had the misfortune to be afflicted by really bad bastards: in the *Bounty* affair, mainly Fletcher Christian, and in the Rum Rebellion, those horrible bastards of the New South Wales Corps. On each occasion Bligh was absolutely in the right.

**Q:** I suppose the other guy is romanticized as being the underdog.

**Chandler:** Yes. In the case of the Rum Rebellion, the early garrisons of New South Wales were taken from the Royal Marines, and they weren't very satisfactory. So a special corps was formed, consisting in all ranks, of absolute throwouts from the British Army. All the really bad types. The officers of the New South Wales Corps were up to their eyebrows in every racket, and in fact became the robber barons of that period. And Bligh was for the small farmers and even the convicts, and officers of New South Wales Corps represented this. After the Rum Rebellion, the ringleaders were court-martialed and got off far too lightly — they should have been shot. There were other governors, and as long as the New South Wales Corps were organized as a military party, they were a pain in the ass to every governor. They were making the governors' lives miserable. Then of course these people, who grabbed vast stretches of land, became the ancestors of the so-called best families of New South Wales, who, in order to

sweeten the memories of their own ancestors, have done their damndest to blacken Bligh's memory ever since. That's the origin of all the unfounded stories about the bullying, tyrannous, arrogant Captain Bligh.

**Q:** Have you thought of doing a straight historical book to set things right?

**Chandler:** Well, oddly enough, the project on which I am now engaged, *Kelly Country*, is a sort of historical novel. In fact there were screams from the Australian science fiction community when the names of those successful in obtaining fellowships were announced late last year. I was listed as having been granted a two-year senior fellowship to write an historical novel. Everybody screamed, "Chandler's sold out to the establishment," Whereas in actuality what I am writing is an "If" of history novel, which requires as much research as a straight history.

**Q:** How do you take a series of historical events and turn them into science fiction without the result seeming like historical fiction in a thin disguise?

**Chandler:** Well, the whole point was that there was not, in actuality, an Australian war of independence in 1880. I shan't change the course of history. I shall have the Australian war of independence breaking out in 1880. I shall have a charismatic leader, who furthermore, had much more imagination than the average general of his day: a leader who would have the brains to grasp the fact that a steam-operated gatling gun, which could have been used in those days — Gatling was willing to make the things — would have a far higher rate of fire than a hand-operated one, and furthermore could have been of a much larger calibre; a man who would have had the intelligence to use a far-fetched device, such as the Andrews Airship, which actually flew successfully in the USA in the

1860's. The darned thing worked, but nobody took it up.

**Q:** Lighter than air? Like a dirigible?

**Chandler:** Yes, lighter than air. It was dirigible. It could be steered. It would go where it was supposed to go. In fact, if you've read "Grimes and the Great Race" in the April 1980 *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, I have based the racing airships in that story on the Andrews Airship. So from that, you get an idea as to how it worked. It could have been used.

**Q:** What do you plan to do once you're finished with *Kelly country*?

**Chandler:** *Kelly Country* will require about a year's research and a year's writing, of course meanwhile I am being maintained by the Australian taxpayer in the style to which I have become accustomed. Then, having finished *Kelly Country*, I hope to sell it at a good price, because it remains my property, after which, of course, I return to Grimes, now that he's had his long service leave.

**Q:** What do you find the most satisfactory of anything you've done?

**Chandler:** I think that perhaps my favorite is *The Big Black Mark*. As I said, that was based very closely on Bligh and the *Bounty*. Because, you see, there are certain seamen who are, you might say, in my own private pantheon. My favorite seamen, I suppose, are Matthew Benders; and of course Cook; and Bligh; and the American Commodore Levi — he was quite a lad — and of course Joseph Conrad, the finest novelist of the English language; Dampier, the literary buccaneer; and going back quite some years, Will Adams, who was the real live character that James Clavell based his Major Blackthorn on in *Shōgun*.

**Q:** Presumably Conrad influenced you as a writer, What other writers did?

**Chandler:** Regarding the use of words,



even though I am an agnostic, I'd say the King James version of the Bible.

**Q:** How about C.S. Forester?

**Chandler:** And of course Forester. Regarding him, I didn't realize for quite a while that Grimes was one of his bastard sons. He's had quite a few. Though, oddly enough, I just don't like any of the many imitation Hornblowers. The only character, the only sea captain of that period by another whom I like, is O'Brien's Captain Jack Aubrey. The same period as Hornblower, but one knows that if the two met, they would hate each other. All the other imitation Hornblowers are modeled far too closely on Hornblower.

**Q:** Did you ever have any contact with Forester about Grimes being a bastard son of his character?

**Chandler:** No. I didn't realize to what an extent Grimes was modeled on Hornblower — it was really quite unconscious — until, I would say, much later on, when my wife, whenever she wanted to annoy me, would refer to

Grimes as Hornblower. "Not another Hornblower book, darling." Then I suddenly realized it, and I did what Forester did with Hornblower. I decided to establish the character's background with *The Road to the Rim* which, as you may recall, was dedicated to Admiral Lord Hornblower. This, oddly enough, led to a sharp increase of Forester's sales. Unluckily at that time, he himself could no longer benefit. But his estate did. This dedication also led to a sharp increase of his sales in Japan, because Japanese readers, seeing the dedication, asked "Who is Hornblower?" Then, of course, if you explained who Hornblower was, they'd go and buy Hornblower books. [Laughs]

**Q:** Are there any science fiction writers you would consider to be influences?

**Chandler:** Wells, of course.

**Q:** But none of the contemporaries?

**Chandler:** No. There are many whom I admire very much indeed, though.

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# THE SYNCOPATED MAN

by Sharon Webb

art: Karl Kofoed



*Sharon Webb, who is new to the pages of Amazing but not to science fiction, mentioned in her last letter that she is "feeling horribly disorganized" on account of her current writing project, a medical/suspense/disaster novel, which is so complicated that she had to construct a large map, complete with personalized pushpins, to keep track of all the characters. "Perhaps I need a computer chip implanted in my brain to help out," she says.*

*Considering the kind of stories that she writes, we hope not; we like her just as she is.*

*Watch for her novel, Earthchild, from Atheneum.*

A stone was crushing Murphy's chest and he moaned with the pain.

A blurred white form produced a razor that whisked off patches of hair from his chest. The naked spots were quickly covered with three round white pads attached to wires.

A woman's voice said, "Mr. Murphy? Tim? Timothy?"

Another female voice said, "Try calling him Murph—Hey, Murph?" A second blurry form approached, faded, then sharpened into the figure of a nurse. "How're you doing, Murph?"

Cold sweat dripped from his body, drenching him, but his lips were dry as they tried to shape the word, "hurts."

"We'll take care of that." The point of a needle seared into a vein. A moment later a warmth rose in his arm and insinuated itself into his brain. Some of the pain faded.

A faint beeping sound penetrated. "The monitor's showing a normal sinus rhythm. Start the O<sub>2</sub>."

A plastic tube speared at his nostrils. Cold sharp air blew into him dissolving more of the pain.

He tried to sit up. Firm hands pressed him back into soft pillows. "Don't try to get up, Murph. You need to rest."

"Why—what? I've got to get to work." He had that group of trainees coming at ten. Then the appointment with Pearson at two. "Have to get to work." He pressed against the restraining hands, but then his strength oozed away and he lay still.

"You're in the hospital, Murph. Everything's going to be OK, but you have to rest now." A soft cloth wiped over his face, drying him. "You've had a little heart attack, but you're going to be fine. You're in the Cardiac Care Unit, St. John's Hospital."

He tried to focus his eyes. Two bottles of clear liquid hung on a pole at the foot of his bed. He reached for them and they jiggled with the motion. Something grasped his hand and pressed it gently down. "Don't try to move, Mr. Murphy. You have a needle in your arm."

He slept.

Unrelenting pain woke him. He moaned and tried to turn. The faint beeping sound changed rhythm. "Multi-focal PVCs. Give him a bolus of Lidocaine. I'll increase his oxygen."

Cold air hissed into his nostrils. The pain crouched like an animal on his chest.

An alarm sounded, raucous in his ears.

"Oh, God! V-fib. Get the defibrillator."

Distantly, very distantly, a machine hummed to life.

*Murphy looked down from his vantage point somewhere near the ceiling above the bed. A nurse pressed twin metal paddles on the still chest below.* "Stand back."

*The current surged. Shock waves became a giant catapult. . . .*

He stood in front of a bright white and yellow classroom. Two dozen strange faces searched his.

Murphy had no idea where he was. Desperately, he tried to pull his thoughts together. The pain — the awful pain. He'd been in the hospital. Heart attack. That's what they said it was. Then the floating feeling — the looking down. *He'd looked down at his own body . . . and the pain was gone.*

For a moment his mind erased. Then into the void came the inescapable conclusion—he was dead.

The silence in the classroom grew strained. He was supposed to say something to them. But what? His mouth formed an "I"; his hands rose puppet-like in a supplicating gesture, palms up — thick palms, stubby fingers, dull gold ring — *Not his hands.*

Raw panic gripped him. He bolted for the door, fumbling at the knob, looking back for one frozen moment at two dozen strangers wearing strange clothes, wearing identical surprised looks on their twenty-four faces. The door flew open and he found himself in a long white hallway. He raced down it, turning at the first intersecting corridor he found, running until his heaving chest and wobbling legs forced him to stop and lean heavily against the wall, head against outstretched forearm. *A forearm that was not his own.*

He stared at the arm incongruously attached to himself. Black thick hair studded the skin. A watch, at least he thought it might be a watch, circled the thick wrist. A choking pulse hammered in his throat. Dead or not, he wanted to vomit. The urge grew when the sudden childhood memory came of Sister Luke, menacing in her long black habit, scolding him for small boy sins, "*You'll go straight to Hell, Timothy Murphy. Straight to Hell!*"

The nausea increased and he looked desperately up and down the hallway. Was there a men's room in hell? Most of the doorways were numbered, but across the hall were two with symbols on the door. Hand over mouth, he stood before them, uncertainly.

One of the doors opened and a woman stepped out. "Why, Mr. Saverance. Are you all right?"

Murphy bolted through the other door. He raced to a bulbous toilet and kneeling before it, vomited copiously into its black interior. He clung weakly to the bowl and retched again, eyes blurring, then focusing again on the trademark etched on the toilet — **Combust-O-Flush**. There was no flush handle — only a button. He pressed it and a transparent lid slid over the seat. Blue flame erupted in the bowl and incinerated his offering. He was surely in hell.

He staggered across the room to a row of sinks and somehow managed through a manipulation of buttons to make water flow into the basin. He splashed water on his face until he felt his head clear, then he slowly

straightened up. The face that stared back at him from the mirror was not his own.

He whirled around, back to the mirror, trying to think. He slapped his hand against his chest and hip searching for cigarettes. There were none. No pockets either. He pondered this in depth, clinging to the thought tenaciously. It was far easier to think about being out of cigarettes and pockets than about being in hell in somebody else's body.

The door to the men's room opened. A heavy-set man with a concerned look on his face strode across the room. "Are you all right, Jim? I heard you were sick."

"Tim," Murphy corrected automatically. "I threw up. Do you have a cigarette?"

"You mean tobacco?" A puzzled look came over the newcomer's face. "I've never broken the law, Jim. Neither have you. Look, if you're in some kind of trouble, I—"

Murphy grabbed the man by the shoulders. "Do you know me?"

"Of course. Of course I know you."

"Then who am I?"

The man twisted uneasily in his grip. "You're Jim. Jim Saverance. Hey, let me go. Enough's enough."

Murphy loosened his grip and, turning away, stared at the unseemly reflection in the mirror. "You say you know me, but my name's Tim, not Jim. Tim Murphy — and I think I'm dead."

The man's eyes widened for a moment, then narrowed in sudden sympathy. "It's going to be all right, fellow." He patted Murphy's shoulder solicitously. "It'll be all right. Just as soon as we can get you to a horologist."

The lettering on the door said:

**JASON PORTER, HOROLOGIST**  
**General Practice**

Murphy had ample time to ponder the sign. He'd read it forwards when he entered the door to the burnt orange waiting room lock-stepping between two tall blue-clad attendants. He'd read it backwards, tracing its letters from right to left, mirroring them in his mind's eye, as he sat sandwiched between the two who politely, but firmly, kept a hand on each of his arms.

The initial panic had worn off. He had dropped into a minor key of depression offset with occasional cadenzas of "why me?"

His eyes traveled around the bland room, empty except for himself and his silent keepers, to the far wall where a lamp with an hour-glass base illuminated a low table strewn with a few dog-eared magazines. Their covers blared — *Horology Today*. Another magazine hypnotized him with its title:

emiT  
emIt  
eMit  
Emit

It came to him that maybe there was nothing wrong at all, that this was only a dream — the granddaddy of nightmares it was sure, but only a dream. But a little kernel of his mind swelled and grew the thought “lie”. He swept it away and stared at the outer door again. Horologist had ten letters. Spell it again: h-o-r-o-l-o-g-i-s-t. Keep spelling it and you won’t have to think about what it means.

Murphy riveted his attention on the ten letters. They were an anchor that kept his mind from blowing away. But unbidden, other thoughts kept oozing to the surface. Maybe his mind was already gone. Maybe he was hallucinating. Dangerously insane. Why else those two mute giants in blue who flanked him? Could you be dead and crazy too? And wasn’t that Hell?

*For God’s sake, Murphy. Get control. This way lies madness . . . and that way . . . and that way.*

H-o-r-o-l-o-g-i-s-t. Maybe he, whatever, whoever, he was could help. This guy, this horologist, was probably some highpowered psychiatrist. Probably a specialist in — maybe amnesia. Amnesia. Sure. Why hadn’t he thought of that before? Am—knee—zha—it had a comfortable ring to it. Loss of memory, that’s what it was. He just couldn’t remember temporarily. Wouldn’t that account for everything? Well, maybe not everything, but it had to be some kind of amnesia. Maybe a sort of dislocation of memory rather than a loss. Anyway, the horologist would know all about it. Give him a shot. Fix him up . . . .

H-o-r-o-l-o-g-i-s-t.

Finally, the two attendants marched him into a dimly lighted room and deposited him on a large chair that vaguely resembled a dentist’s chair with a difference. The chair’s arms gently encircled him and held him clutched in a padded grip. The attendants left.

Alone, Murphy realized with a shock that he missed the two men. Even though he seemed to be their prisoner, he felt more secure with them around as if they were something real that he could cling to. He felt his body tense. As it tensed, the chair responded, pressing its upholstered arms closer around his middle.

Thank God for the chair. It gave him something to occupy his mind. Now let’s see. If he tensed up more — The chair responded instantly. Try relaxing. Take a few deep breaths. Deeper. Slower.

The arms of the chair relaxed perceptibly.

That’s the way. Take a few more deep breaths. *Relax.*

The chair's grip slackened.

Good enough. If he could control his muscle tension, he'd be able to ease right out of the chair. Then — out of the office before the attendants could think. And then — Then *what?*

The door flew open.

The chair arms squeezed Murphy's ribs as he stared at the roly-poly little man who came up to his side, gave him a warm smile, and shook his hand. "I'm Jason Porter, your horologist. But of course that doesn't mean a thing to you, does it?"

Murphy shook his head.

"I measure time and adjust it when necessary." The horologist stared at him keenly through thick glasses. "Suppose you tell me what happened."

When Murphy finished, the horologist said, "You're not dead, Mr. Murphy. Not dead at all."

"Then it's my mind," reflected Murphy. "I've lost my mind — or my memory."

"Not at all," answered the horologist. "You've lost your body."

Murphy's eyes widened with shock. God in heaven. This was the man who was supposed to help him.

The horologist smiled gently. "You're not crazy. Let me try to explain what's happened. One moment you were conscious of being Tim Murphy in Tim Murphy's body. The next moment you're Tim Murphy in someone else's body. You've obviously not lost your mind — that is, your identity. What you've lost is your body."

Murphy stared at the kind brown eyes magnified by the lenses. The eyes were absolutely without malice — and very sane. Unaccountably, Murphy began to cry.

The horologist tactfully ignored Murphy's emotional state. "Now to answer your next question — what happened to your body? That's a little more involved. I'm going to need your cooperation. Close your eyes and try to help me. I want you to imagine that you're in a theater. Imagine that on the screen in front of you is a motion picture."

Without much hope, Murphy closed his eyes.

"Now. Think about what a motion picture is."

"Just a series of still pictures."

"Go on," said the horologist.

"They're projected sequentially. Fast enough that the eye sees them as continuous motion."

"Exactly. And what do you see in between each picture?"

"Nothing."

"But there is a gap between each picture. A gap that you don't perceive."

"Well, yes."



"Good. Now then, imagine that the motion picture in front of you is your reality — Tim Murphy's life."

"Just what are you trying to tell me?"

The horologist looked at him for a long moment. "Ask yourself this, Mr. Murphy: *What's going on in the gaps?*"

*He was suspended within nothing . . . nowhere . . . notime . . . not. Something gathered on the periphery of himself.*

*The peripheral being had a name. It was some one.*

A voice came to him bearing scrambled fragments that rearranged themselves into concept:

"I'm sorry I had to use hypno-drugs, Mr. Murphy, but you seemed so upset I thought it would save a lot of discomfort. I am communicating now directly with your supracconscious mind."

*The peripheral being had a name. It had an "I." It called itself timmurphy.*

The voice said, "Consciousness flickers. You, as Tim Murphy, are only aware of certain pulsations of consciousness. These you perceive as reality. Although there are gaps between these pulsations, to you reality is continuous."

*He was a beacon. Searing light tore from him, illuminating the far reaches of his being, revolving . . . pulsating.*

"Another part of you is aware of other pulsations — the Jim Saverance reality. There are other realities also, but these two are the only ones that are out of sequence."

*He was a beacon flashing luminous pulsations through the universe of himself. Others . . . some ones . . . gathered at the edges of consciousness.*

"When your heart fibrillated, the electrical currents of the defibrillator caused an arrhythmia in your state of being. At the moment the current passed through your heart, you missed a pulse of consciousness. Instead of a compensatory pause and an assumption of the next pulse, you were activated by a premature pulsation — that of Jim Saverance.

"You, Tim Murphy, are perceiving only the off beats now — a syncope of consciousness. One moment you were in a hospital bed, the next moment, you found yourself in Jim Saverance's classroom. Mr. Saverance is, of course, reversed too. He is at this moment undoubtedly undergoing a worse experience than yours. He has not only lost his body, but also his health."

*Another peripheral being had an "I." It called itself jimsaverance. It cried its name from a hospital bed — JIMSAVERANCE.*

"You have a choice. You can stay as you are. We can offer you retraining . . . therapy . . ."

*The beacon flashed. . . The timmurphy "I" raised pleading hands from an enfolding chair. . . The jimsaverance "I" moaned from a hospital bed. . .*

*"Never."*

"I can try to reverse your situation, but the risk is great. Although time is meaningless to the supraconscious, it is the very fabric of the Murphy-Saverance existence. You risk disruption of the threads of time. You risk annihilation."

*The beacon flashed. . . .The "I"s screamed. . . . "I CHOOSE MYSELF."*

"Very well, then. I'm going to activate an electrical field that will serve to temporarily dissociate your consciousness from its core. Good luck, Tim Murphy. Goodbye. . . .

Black shrouds began to fall away from the edges of his mind.

He slowly became aware of a far-away pain beginning. It grew, wracking his body into consciousness. He blinked, then stared around the room in horror. For a blinding moment he thought he was displaced again, thrust into another syncopation of consciousness. The room — The people — It was all wrong! It was —


"Are you all right?"

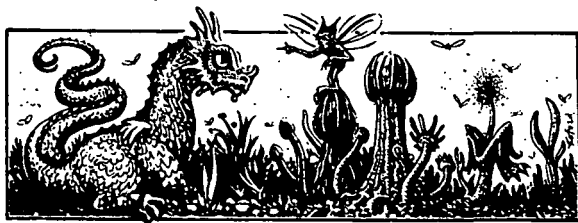
The pain was ebbing. He caught his breath and tried to focus on the face hanging over him. As he did, he felt a haziness steal over his brain. He tried to blink away, but it was so insistent. . . .

Silly. He felt nervous, but he couldn't have said why. An overwhelming fatigue dragged his eyelids down. From far away, an echo in his brain reverberated once, then faded. What was it? He tried to remember, but it didn't seem to matter now. Not really. He'd worry about it later.

"Are you all right?" repeated the nurse.

The pain was beginning again, tugging with hot fingers at his belly. "Hurts . . . hurts," he said.

"I'll give you something for that." In a moment, she leaned over him. She held a blue disc in her furry little hand. "Bite down on this. It will help some." The nurse's muzzle quivered in sympathy. "I know it hurts, Mrs. Xoot'qot, but you've got to expect a certain amount of pain when you're having your first litter." 



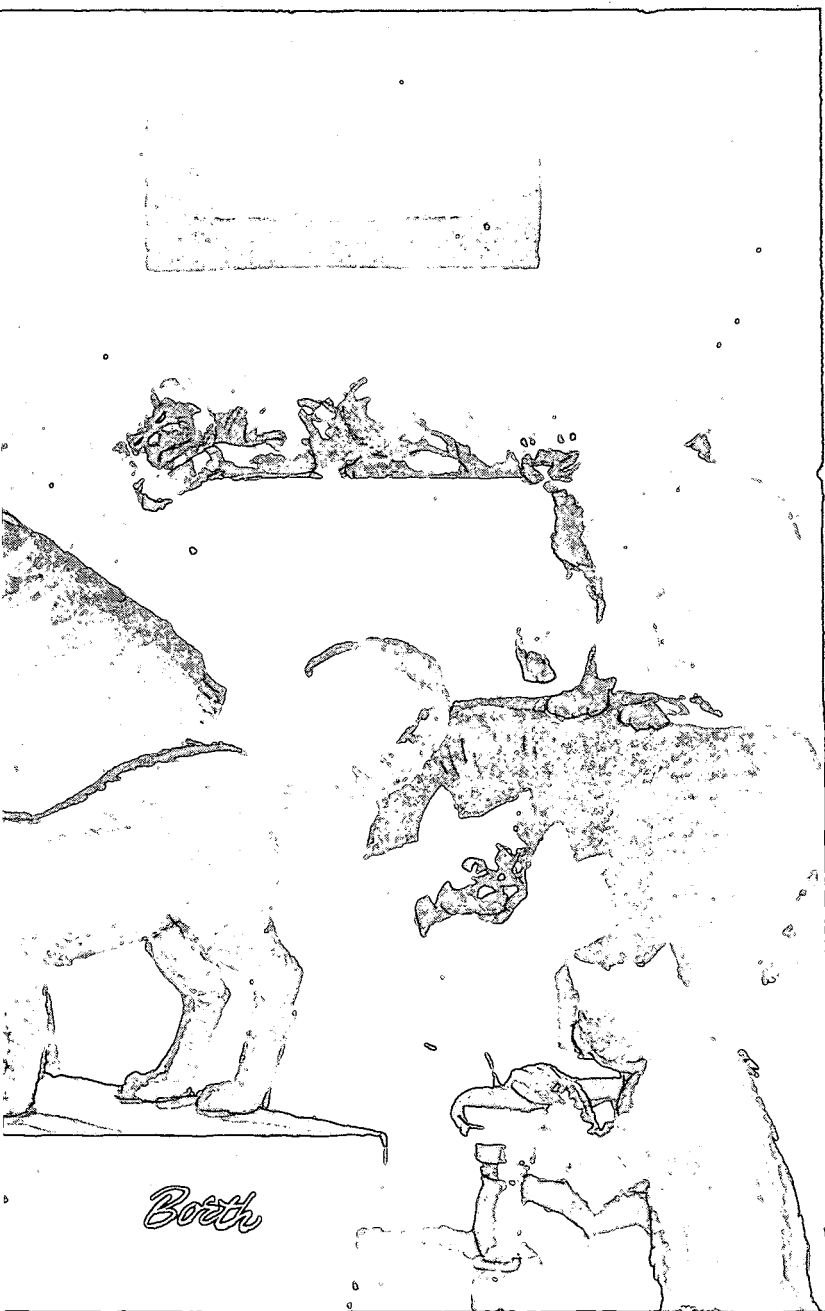
# SAND PAINTING

by Allen L. Wold

art: Frank Borth



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Edmond Plover felt a sudden pain in his chest. At first he thought it was heartburn. At his age, one's digestion wasn't what it used to be. He left the kitchen, where he'd been washing up after lunch of sausages and fried potatoes, and went into the living room to sit in his big old chair. He dislodged one of his seven cats as he sat down.

He waited for the pain to pass. It was right in the middle of his chest, oddly sharp. Jason, the cat he'd displaced, jumped into his lap. He petted it idly. Edmond seemed to be short of breath too. That wasn't a good sign.

Sandow came over to get its share of attention, but Jason wouldn't let it up. Edmond reached down to scratch Sandow where it stood beside his chair. His hand, his left hand, was numb. The left side of his face felt funny.

No sense trying to fool himself. He'd had a heart attack.

He shouldn't have been as surprised as he was, he thought, watching his cats moving around the small living room. At 81, he was long overdue for something like this. Luckily it had been a mild attack. Lots of men got killed in their forties when their hearts gave out all at once.

He had no history of heart trouble. If he were young and healthy, a little medical attention, a change of diet, and he'd be all right. But he was old and fragile. Even the smallest attack could prove fatal. The thought frightened him. He didn't want to die.

He tried not to think about it. He watched Medea, over by the front window, stretching and yawning in the sun. Hector and Victor kept the television warm, lying side by side. They had always gotten on especially well. Jason purred in his lap. Sandow arched against his numb fingers. He couldn't see Thorndike or Luther at the moment, but they were in the room somewhere.

He was going to die, he realized. Not at some abstract time in the future, but soon, this afternoon, this evening, tonight. He had no doubt about that.

It wasn't the heart attack itself which was killing him. That was just the final straw. He could feel its repercussions rippling through him. His body was nearly worn out, and it just couldn't stand the additional strain.

Jason felt it wasn't getting enough attention and jumped down off Edmond's lap to find something else to do. Sandow jumped up to take Jason's place. Edmond just laid his hand on the cat's back, and tried to catch his breath.

He didn't want to call a doctor. Medicine couldn't save him, it could only prolong his dying. He didn't want that, dying in a hospital. He'd much rather do it here, in his own little house, with his cats. If he had to die at all.

His will was made out. His legal affairs were all in order. There was no unfinished business. But he wasn't ready to die yet. He wasn't ready at all.

There was something he could do about it, he remembered. He didn't

have to give up without a struggle. He'd learned some strange things over the years, things smart people didn't believe in. They went against his intellectual bias too, but he'd had ample proof of their reality. Things he'd learned when he'd lived with the Navajoes in Arizona.

He felt weak and tired. He didn't have much time left. If he was going to do it, he'd better get started. He wasn't going to get any better just sitting here with his cats. He pushed Sandow off his lap and stood up. It was harder to do than he'd expected, but not as hard as he'd feared.

He walked through the living room and up the hall past his bedroom to the tiny room he called his study. It wasn't a big enough room to hold all his books, so he'd had several thousand of them stored up in his attic. The book he wanted now, however, was hidden behind the shelved volumes on anthropology and sociology, right beside his desk.

It was an old blank book, one of the half dozen he'd bought when he'd gone off to Arizona in '23. He'd been working for Dr. Fred Roberts then, the anthropologist who'd collected and published reproductions of so many of the famous sand paintings. If Roberts had known half of what Edmond had been up to, he would have taken him off the project at once.

Handwriting and diagrams in colored pencil filled only the first twenty pages or so. It was his transcription of the rituals the Navajo elders had taught him, that they'd never let another white man know about.

Roberts hadn't been aware of anything out of the ordinary, of course. Edmond Plover had known the value of discretion, and the Indians certainly weren't going to say anything. Edmond had had a knack of getting along with the village elders, of being accepted by them. He'd done them a few favors; and in return, they had taught him a few things. Magic things. He didn't like to think about what he'd done to earn that knowledge. His skin still bore the scars.

That had been more than fifty years ago. He hadn't believed in magic then; and he still didn't, though he'd studied it since, in his career as a sociology professor down at the University in Doyle. But he couldn't deny that the magics the Navajoes had taught him worked, the ones that he'd tried. It had surprised him the first time, and still did. He didn't perform the rituals very often, and always very discreetly.

He'd never told his wife about the magic. Doreen had been a religious woman. She'd thought all magic was the work of the devil. It had been the only secret he'd kept from her.

He'd never let his children know either, after they'd grown. Partly he was afraid of ridicule, of being thought crazy. Mostly it was his natural sense of discretion.

Thorndike and Jason came padding in to see what he was up to. He ignored them and sat down in the swivel chair at his desk, putting the book down in front of him. He was afraid of it, because he didn't know how the magic worked. It just did, and there was no explanation.

The first magic was supposed to protect the house from burglars. He could only assume that it did, since he had never been burglarized. He renewed the magic every year in January, just to make sure.

The second was for good health. It couldn't prevent appendicitis, or a broken arm — or heart attacks. But it did prevent infectious diseases. It was the first magic he'd tried, when he'd had severe pneumonia in '32. It hadn't worked the first time, or the second, but on the third try it had cured him at once, and convinced him that the magic was real. Since then, he'd never had a cold or anything like that.

There was the charm to find lost things. It had to be your own thing that was lost, not somebody else's; and it didn't work if the thing was stolen. Edmond was a careful man; he had seldom had need for the charm. But there had been the misplaced contract, the lost dog, the missing library book. In each case, after working the magic, it had been like following a smell, or a musical tone, right to where the thing was; though, like the magic for health, it had taken him more than one try the first time.

There was the magic to make the crops grow, of course. The Indians had had more than one such ritual; but this one was special, not widely known even among the Navajoes. You still had to water and fertilize and keep the weeds out, but your plants had no pests or diseases.

The last magic was different from the others. It was considered black magic. He had never tried it before, and had forgotten until just moments ago that it was in his notebook. If he remembered right, it was supposed to give a dying person a second chance at life. The others had worked; this one should too, though it would probably take him more than one try.

One by one the other cats came into the study. They always wanted to be in the same room with him. He found that comforting. They and their predecessors had been his only company since his wife had died in '61, twenty years ago now.

All the rituals were performed in roughly the same way. A sand painting, a trance, a chant, and the destruction of the painting. Easy once you knew how. Devilishly hard to learn how.

He cleared off the desk, having to remove Medea twice. Then, from a bottom drawer, he took little plastic bags of colored sand, the kind sold in pet stores to put in the bottom of a fish tank. He propped the book up at the side, open to the lifesaving magic.

The first thing on the page was a diagram, drawn in colored pencil, of a sand painting. Using the bright fish-tank sand, Edmond started copying the pattern onto the top of his desk. The Indians would have drawn it much larger, on the ground, big enough for several people to dance on at once. But this was big enough. He didn't have to dance on the picture to rub it out. His hands would be sufficient. It was the destruction of the picture that made the magic work. It was a kind of sacrifice.



That destruction was the last part of the magic. One first had to gather the forces of nature, and tie them to the picture. The Indians prepared themselves for this with hours of meditation, to induce a hypnotic trance. Then they would start dancing and chanting their magic words. This nailed down the knot of magic force to the painting. It was the words that did it, repeated over and over again. Then the whole magic would be cocked, primed, and ready to go. With the destruction of the sand painting, the forces would be released, and the object of the magic would be realized.

Hector tried to get up on the desk. Edmond knocked him off, gently but firmly. The cats wanted to find out what he was up to; but he'd tried to train them not to get on his desk in the first place, especially when he was doing magic. They still needed reminding now and then.

His hands weren't as steady trickling the sand as he would have liked. He had to work more slowly and carefully than he was used to. He was only about half way through with it when the doorbell rang. He wondered for a moment who it could be, then remembered that he'd called Blake that morning, to have him bring some books down from the attic. He chafed at the interruption, shooed the cats out of the study, closed the door behind him, and went to answer the bell.

Gene Blake was waiting on the front step when Edmond opened the door. He was a ne'er-do-well in his mid-thirties; strong, intelligent, not bad looking. But he was lazy, shiftless, constantly in trouble with the law, living off unemployment and whatever odd jobs he could scrape up. He'd served time in the county jail for petty thievery, brawling, disturbing the peace. At least he wasn't a drunkard.

But he was strong; and Edmond had always gotten on well with him, all things considered. Whenever he needed some heavy work done that no one else was willing or had the time to do, he usually called on Blake. Edmond didn't like him much, but he was the only odd-job handyman in town.

"Come on in," Edmond said, stepping back from the door.

"You need some books?" Blake asked as he entered. His eyes quickly searched the room, as they always did whenever he came over.

"Yes, I have an old encyclopedia up in the attic. *Sacred Texts of the Ancient Near East*." He started to turn toward the hall where the attic access was.

"What do you need books like that for?" Blake asked, not moving from where he stood. The front door was still open behind him. Edmond turned back slowly. The pain in his chest and the shortness of his breath made it hard for him to respond quickly.

"I want to compare Near Eastern symbology with that of the Indians of the American South-West," he answered. He'd always been patient with Gene Blake, and polite, and had paid him well for the work he'd asked

him to do.

"Why don't you go to the library?" Blake asked, his head cocked on one side, examining Edmond as if he were a strange animal.

"They don't have it there," Edmond said. "It's about thirty volumes, a very scholarly work, long out of print. Even the University down in Doyle doesn't have a copy any more."

"All right, whatever you say." At last Blake closed the door and followed Edmond up the hall, where he pulled the cord that brought down the folding stairs out of the ceiling. There was still room to pass on either side.

"They're way in the back," Edmond said as Blake started up. He hadn't used them since 1950. It would take Blake at least half an hour just to find them, and several trips to bring them all down to the living room. They were large and heavy. Edmond should have plenty of time to finish his sand painting without further interruption.

He went back to his study and shut the cats out. He didn't have the time or the patience to deal with them now. Slowly, carefully, he added more sand to the painting on his desk. He could hear Blake moving around overhead.

If this magic didn't work the first time, he might not live long enough for a second try. If it failed, and he was going to die after all, he should let somebody know. His children all lived in other states; but one granddaughter, Elizabeth, lived down in Doyle, with her husband, Joe, and her two children, Gloria and Alex. She came to visit often; she would understand what he wanted, not make him go to the hospital.

He would try the spell and see what happened. If it failed, and he had the strength, he would try again. If he couldn't make the effort, he should have plenty of time to give Elizabeth a call. It would take her a while to get here, 45 minutes or so. He didn't like the idea of her sitting by watching him die, but the thought of lying dead in his house for days before he was found, or . . .

The sound of a push mower interrupted his thoughts. All his neighbors used power mowers. That must mean that Steve Murphy had come over to mow the lawn.

Steve had graduated from high school this last spring, and was planning to go to UNC Doyle in the fall. He'd been mowing Edmond's lawn for five years, ever since he was twelve. He was a good boy. He lived just three houses over.

The colored sand picture was a lot brighter than those made by the Indians. That was all right; if they'd had colors like these, they would have used them. The magic would still work. It always had before, with the other rituals he'd performed.

He heard Blake, out in the hall, come down the attic steps, then go into the living room. There was a thud, as an armload of books hit the floor.

Blake's steps came back, and went up into the attic again.

Edmond finished the picture of stylized birds and fish and corn. He had to rest a moment before putting himself in the trance. That took calm, quiet, a few minutes' concentration. Now that his brain was being affected by a diminished oxygen supply, it might take longer than usual.

He checked his sand painting against the diagram in the book. It was all right. Then he read over the description of the ritual. There were a few words to be chanted out loud. The Indians sang them over and over again, working into their trance. Edmond had had a psychologist teach him how to auto-hypnotize himself, and could achieve the same state in a matter of minutes. He would have to say the words only once, when everything else was set up.

He memorized the chant. He had forgotten what the words meant, but that didn't matter. It was the sound that was important, that vibrated so strangely in the air when the words were spoken. Magic words were like that, whatever language they were in, whatever culture they came from.

There was only one problem. He should have read the ritual all the way through before starting. The magic transferred the soul from the dying person into the body of another. That was what made it black magic. For it to work, he would need a victim, a human sacrifice.

He leaned back in his chair, utterly frustrated. It was no use going any further. He felt let-down. He'd let himself hope, and now he had to just face the fact that he was going to die after all.

He got up from his desk, and went out into the hall, just as Blake came down with another armload of books. He let the man precede him into the living room, where Blake dropped the ten heavy volumes on top of the first ten he'd brought down.

"These the right books?" Blake asked, looking at him oddly.

"Yes," Edmond said, "those are the ones."

"You been sick?" Blake said, still standing by the pile of leather-bound volumes.

"As a matter of fact, yes. Why do you ask?"

"The side of your face is all funny. And your voice sounds odd, like you had a mouth full of novocain. What's the matter, heart attack?"

"No, nothing like that," Edmond denied, feeling a sudden apprehension. "I've just been up nights lately, just tired is all, got a bit of a cold maybe."

"You never get colds," Blake said. He looked down at the books, then back up at Edmond's face.

"Now look," he said, "I don't want to give you any trouble, but it looks to me like you've had a heart attack. Least little thing, and you could go off just like that." He snapped his fingers.

"You should take it easy," he went on, "not worry about guys like me. I figure it's time I got out of this town, went somewhere else. That would

do you good too. The ten dollars you offered me to bring these books down would be nice, but it's sure not enough to move out of town on. I know you don't keep cash around the house, but I've seen all that silverware you have in the dining room. Suppose you could let me have it?"

"What do you mean, let you have it?" Edmond asked warily.

"I can get a good price for it over in Raleigh," Blake said. "A man I know there. Then I could leave town, go up to Chicago maybe. I got friends there."

"No, no, I couldn't do that," Edmond said. "That's been in the family a long time. My wife, Doreen, got that from her grandmother when she and I were married, back in '29. If you need bus fare, I could loan you the money, write you a check."

"That's no good," Blake said with a lazy grin. "I think the silver is the best idea. Now you just sit yourself down. I can find it myself. A man in your condition, you shouldn't exert yourself. You might stumble and fall, break something. That heart of yours would just give out all at once, now wouldn't it?"

Edmond was shocked and surprised. Blake was a coward, and had never threatened him before. He hadn't expected him to do anything like this. But what could he do? He went over to his chair and sat down. Blake went into the dining room and started opening the chest of drawers there, where the silver was kept.

The thought of losing the silver, and his helplessness to prevent it, made Edmond furious. He owned few enough things of any value, and that sterling service meant a lot to him. It was still complete, and in perfect condition. It was valuable, not only for the silver, but also as an antique.

He hated Blake for robbing him, even more for taking advantage of him when he was so sick. It wasn't fair that a despicable man like Blake should live, when Edmond was about to die.

"Gene, wait," he called, struggling up out of the chair. The idea thrilled and horrified him. The sand painting was all done. All Edmond needed was a victim, a body to transfer his soul into.

"What is it, Plover?" Blake asked, coming into the living room carrying the dark wooden box which held the sterling.

"Let me write you a check," Edmond pleaded, "everything I've got in the account. But leave the silver. I've left that to my great-granddaughter, Gloria, in my will." He would switch bodies with Blake, serve him right. Then, in Blake's young and healthy body, and with the check, he could go off somewhere and start a new life.

"How much do you have?" Blake asked.

"Over two thousand dollars." This was his chance. He could live, and punish Blake at the same time. But first he had to get Blake into the study,

within range of the magic of the sand painting.

"This silver is worth a lot more than that," Blake said.

"Yes, it is, but your friend won't give you what it's worth." He had to struggle to breathe. "Come into my study, I keep the checkbook there." It wouldn't take him long to perform the rest of the ritual. He could almost do it while writing the check.

Blake hefted the box of silver, as if thinking it over. "Thanks a lot, Plover," he said, "but no thanks." He went to the front door and opened it. "I'll see that this is well taken care of." He laughed, and closed the door quietly behind him.

"No, wait — " Edmond said, but the door remained shut. He felt a shock of failure run through him, straining his already weakened heart. He sat nervelessly back down in his chair.

Cats came in and went out, jumped up on his lap and jumped off. He ignored them. Medea and Thorndike had a brief squabble.

Edmond's thoughts idled. He could hear the old push mower, Sears' best, whirring away outside. Edmond's house was small, but he had a fair sized yard. Steve took good care of it, trimming the borders, even pulling a few weeds now and then. He never had to be asked, he just came over when the lawn needed it. When he finished, he'd come in for his fifteen dollars. Edmond could remember mowing lawns for fifty cents.

He'd had a chance to save his life after all, and he'd lost it. The thought of depriving even a man like Blake of life, so that he might go on living, was distressing. But after what Blake had just done, Edmond didn't think his scruples would bother him much.

There was no sense feeling bad about the silver. What use was a sterling service for twelve to him? He had meant Gloria to have it, and was sorry about that. But if he could only have gotten Blake into the study, he could have switched bodies with him. And Blake's surprise at the transfer would probably have killed the old body at once. He wouldn't have suffered, and it would have served him right.

That thought brought his weakened condition back to full awareness. He had to stop being angry. He could feel his heart, trying to beat with dead tissue crippling it. Suppressing his frustration was more difficult. He had to stay calm or he would die right now, not later on tonight or tomorrow. As long as he was alive he still had hope —

He didn't finish the train of thought. He just pulled himself painfully to his feet and hobbled back to his study. His left arm was almost useless, and his left leg was beginning to go numb. Even the simple exertion of standing and walking left him panting. He closed the cats out, and sat down at his desk, looking at his wasted painting.

Maybe he should call the police, make them bring Blake back here. But they wouldn't do that, they'd just take Blake off to jail. Even if they did bring him back, it wouldn't do any good. They'd never leave him and

Blake alone together. He'd never get the chance to use his magic.

Blake had taken advantage of him because he had been able to see how weak and helpless he was. The police would see that too, and would insist on calling a doctor. A doctor would make him go to a hospital. Edmond wanted to live, sure, but not in a hospital, kept in a bed, without his books and cats, helpless.

No, best to just let Blake go.

The sounds from outside told him that Steve had finished the front, and was moving around to the side yard. Either he was working awfully fast, or Edmond was losing track of time. More likely the latter.

Steve was a good boy. Strong, healthy, young. Going through that phase when he was becoming estranged from his family a bit. No real problem, but he was planning on boarding next year. It would save him a twenty-mile drive each way, and get him away from his folks for a while. Edmond knew the Murphys quite well. They were becoming confused by their son. They would not be unduly surprised if his personality were to change suddenly. . . .

Anger, frustration, and his weakening body were befuddling him. He couldn't seriously have considered making the transfer with Steve, instead of Blake. He pushed the thought out of his mind. But like an automaton, he checked to make sure he had the words of the incantation memorized correctly, then worked through the auto-hypnotic exercise.

The crystal clarity of his perceptions told him that it had worked. Among other things, he could now feel his whole body, when he turned his attention to it. He could feel that it was running down, slowly grinding to a halt.

The pain in his chest was still there, large and spreading. Using auto-suggestion, he made himself ignore it; and though it didn't go away, it stopped bothering him.

Now he had to contact and marshal the forces of nature. That, of course, was the true secret the Indians had taught him, not the words, nor the pictures, but the ability to perceive reality in a different way. It didn't matter that he didn't know how it worked. The Navajo elders hadn't known either.

He thought about his body, his mind, and his soul. He made sure he could perceive each in the way he'd been taught. He thought about the spirits of the air, of the earth, of living things. Spirits, laws, abstractions, he didn't know what they really were, but they were there. He focused his thoughts and his energies. The invisible world around him responded.

Though he'd never done this particular magic before, he knew what it felt like when everything was working properly. That was what it felt like now. He wouldn't have to make a second try.

He was surrounded by a flux of force, a knot of potential. He chanted the words that would affix that knot to the sand painting on his desk. He

enunciated clearly, spoke slowly, feeling the vibration in the air.

All was ready. Except he had no one to transfer his soul to.

He let himself come out of the trance, but the pain in his chest hurt too badly. He hypnotized himself again, made the pain retreat into the background. Might as well stay this way until . . . he tried not to think about it.

He sat in his chair, waiting for Steve to finish with the lawn. Time slipped by. Cats scratched at the door. Jason meowed — Edmond could tell by the distinctive voice, half squeak, half purr. He waited. Time slipped by.

The doorbell rang at last. Edmond pulled himself to his feet, but as he stepped away from the chair he stumbled and reached out to steady himself. His hand landed on the one clear space on his desk. If he messed up the picture now it would have to be done all over again from the beginning. A purely academic consideration, of course. He tried to believe that.

The bell rang again. On unsteady feet, panting for breath, Edmond left the study, closing the door behind him. He didn't dare let the cats in there now. He teetered toward the front door and opened it. Steve was waiting patiently on the front step.

"Hello, Steve," Edmond said, stepping back to let the boy into the house. "Come on in and sit down. I'll go get my checkbook."

"How are you doing, Mr. Plover?" Steve asked, coming into the living room.

"A bit tired," Edmond said. "Been working late nights for the last couple of days."

"You look like you could use a rest." Steve was polite, but he didn't mince words.

"That I could. Sit down." He left Steve in the living room and went back to the study. He sat down heavily in the swivel chair, took out the checkbook from the middle desk drawer, and laid it on the clear part of the desk top.

He made out a check to Steve for fifteen dollars, which he laid on the desk. Then, as if he couldn't help himself, he made out another, also to Steve, which cleared out his account. He put this one in his shirt pocket.

"Steve," he called out, his voice quavery and weak. "Could you come in here, please?" The temptation and fear were so strong. His magic was all ready. He kept the cats which had come in the open door from getting on the desk. He swatted Sandow, kept Medea off his lap.

"Are you all right?" Steve asked from the doorway. He looked worried; he must have been able to tell from Edmond's voice that he was not well.

"Just tired. Here's your check." He handed Steve the one for fifteen dollars.

"Thank you, Mr. Plover," Steve said, taking it and putting it in his hip



pocket. There was no way he could miss seeing the sand painting on the desk. "That's quite something," he said, nodding at it.

"Sure is," Edmond said. "I learned how to do that in Arizona, a long time ago."

"That's really neat. What's it supposed to mean?" He came over toward the desk to see better. Edmond moved his chair to one side so that he was at one focus of the energy. That left Steve standing at the other focus. Edmond didn't even have to think about it, the decision was being made for him.

"It represents the soul passing on after death," Edmond said, hardening his heart. This kid hadn't lived long enough to know what he was going to miss. "The Indians paint these on the ground, then they spend hours singing and dancing, and finish up by dancing over the painting, wiping it out." He couldn't reach enough of the painting from where he was sitting to destroy it properly. He tried to move closer.

"I've seen pictures like that in books," Steve said, leaning forward, careful not to touch the sand, but getting in Edmond's way. "Doesn't it kind of mess up your desk, with sand all over it like that?"

"No problem," Edmond said, trying not to pant. "Vacuum cleaner will pick it right up."

"Too bad you can't keep it, like maybe gluing it onto a board or something," Steve said. He bent further over the desk, to get a better view of the upper part of the picture.

"It's not supposed to be kept," Edmond said. If he was going to do it, he wanted to get it over with, before he lost his nerve. "It's supposed to be wiped out." If he could just get around beside Steve, so he could reach the whole picture. "That's a part of the ritual." He tried to get to his feet, but his left leg wouldn't support him.

"Hey, let me help you," Steve said, turning from the desk and catching Edmond under the arm. With his help, Edmond was able to stand, but now he couldn't reach the desk at all.

He heard the front door open. Someone came in the house. "Grampa, are you home?" a feminine voice called from the living room.

Damn, it was Gloria, come up from Doyle. Edmond sat back down heavily in the chair. All he'd needed was ten seconds more. He wanted to cry. What the hell was Gloria doing here?

"We're back here," Steve called out, letting go of Edmond's arm. Gloria came in, a puzzled expression on her face. She didn't know Steve.

"I think your grandfather's sick," Steve told her. Gloria's puzzlement changed to concern.

Edmond sighed and gave up trying to reach the desk. He'd lost his second chance. He was covered with sweat, and felt dizzy.

"Hello, Dear," he said, shocked at the weakness of his voice. "This is Steve Murphy. He mows my lawn. This is my great-granddaughter,

Gloria Harris. She lives in Doyle. I was just showing Steve this old Indian sand painting," he explained, trying to cover his confusion, frustration, and fear.

"Hi, Steve," Gloria said. She was about his age, slender, not as pretty as she might be. "Grampa, are you all right?"

"Yes, Dear, I'm fine, just a little tired is all."

"Are you sure? Let's get you out to the couch."

"Should we get a doctor?" Steve asked.

"He'll be all right," Gloria said, putting her purse down beside the desk. She looked once at the sand painting, then back to her great-grandfather. "He just works too hard sometimes." She had always been quick to catch the mood of people. She could tell that he was trying to cover something up, and was playing along with him. She knew he didn't want a doctor. He appreciated that. He hoped she couldn't discern the rest of his thoughts.

The two young people helped him to his feet, and steadied him as he walked back to the living room. He tried to keep his left foot from dragging too much. They eased him down on the couch, and Gloria made him lie back and put his feet up.

"I'd better be going," Steve said. "If you need anything, just call. Nice to meet you, Gloria." He nodded to her, then went to the front door and left.

"Where's your mother?" Edmond asked. He felt the shadows of death gathering around him.

"She's at home," Gloria said. "Would you like a glass of water? Maybe a bit of sherry?"

"Sherry would be nice." He'd had two chances, and he'd missed them both. "How'd you get up here if your mother's at home?"

"I got my driver's license today. I came up to show off." She went into the kitchen, and came back a moment later with a wine glass full. She put it down on the table beside the couch, then propped him up with pillows so he could drink, and handed him the glass.

Edmond sipped the sherry. It tasted good, but he was dribbling out of the left side of his mouth. He wiped it with the back of his hand, leaving his left hand in his lap. Conflicting emotions struggled within him.

"Well," he said, holding his glass carefully. "So you got your license. Good for you." He was frustrated at having his magic thwarted a second time, fearful of the shadows of death fluttering near him, but at the same time profoundly relieved that he hadn't actually done that horrible thing to Steve.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Gloria asked, ignoring his compliment. She pulled a chair around so she could sit close to him.

"Yes, Dear, I'll be fine. All I need is a little rest." He'd left his study door open. The cats . . . but no, they were all in here.

"I think you need more than rest. You look terrible."

"To tell you the truth," he said, "I feel terrible." He took another sip of the sherry and managed not to dribble, but his hand shook. "I'll be all right, really I will." He knew Gloria wouldn't believe him but he didn't want to admit to her that he was dying. There was no sense burdening her with that.

"Will you let me call a doctor?" she persisted.

"No, please, at my age, all they do is put you in a hospital and stick hoses into you. I don't want that."

"Grampa, you frighten me."

"I'm sorry, Sweetheart, I don't mean to. I'll be just fine, you'll see." He finished the sherry. It did make him feel better. He swung his feet off the couch and managed to sit up without looking too clumsy.

"I was going to ask if you wanted to go for a ride," Gloria said. Edmond hadn't driven a car since he'd turned 75, but he still liked to get out now and then.

"That's sweet of you, Dear, but I don't think today's a good day for it." He was glad for Gloria's company. He hoped he wouldn't die until after she left. "How's your family," he asked. He was truly interested, but he also felt the need for something to distract him from his thoughts.

"Everybody's just fine," Gloria said, and told him all the latest happenings. They talked about her brother Alex, her getting her license, her father's promotion that fell through, about her looking forward to college in Michigan of all places next year. She was young and bright and healthy . . . just like Steve. He squashed the thought.

He couldn't shake off the shadow of death. He was terrified of the darkness closing in on him. He could feel it at his back, resting on his heart, breathing through his brain. He kept the fear from his voice; and, fortunately, Gloria didn't seem to notice.

But the secret thought continued to intrude. Here was a good, healthy body. His spell was all set up. All he had to do was rub out the sand painting. He didn't even have to do it himself. He could ask Gloria to do it for him.

He asked for another glass of sherry instead. While she was out of the room — Luther and Hector following her just in case she had goodies for them — he rearranged his left arm and leg, neither of which would work any more. He massaged the left side of his face, wiping away a trace of spittle. God, he was going to die, right here, right now.

He had been tempted to switch bodies with Blake, and could have justified it in light of what Blake had done to him. He had been tempted again with Steve, out of sheer frustration and fear, though he knew now that guilt would have ridden him for the rest of his unnaturally prolonged life.

But he couldn't switch bodies with Gloria. That would be too horrible,

ough the spectre of death dangled the thought in front of him and would let him think of nothing else. He'd lost two chances; here was a third. It would be so easy, too, now that everything was set up.

She brought him his sherry. They talked a while longer. The more they talked, the more horrible the idea seemed. He couldn't do that to her. He loved Gloria too much. Better he should die.

By the time she was ready to go home for supper he had become almost reconciled to the fact of his imminent death. He excused himself from standing. She kissed him and saw herself out. He heard her drive away.

He felt one last pang of regret for his lost chances at a new life, but that was quickly replaced by gladness that he had not committed the villainy he had contemplated — except maybe for Blake. But Blake was long gone.

It was nearly time for his own supper. He'd never live to eat it. His life was at its end. He'd be better off accepting that, making his peace with himself.

There was just one more thing he had to do. The sand painting in his study was still intact. The magic was still in full force. He couldn't just leave it there. His death would not dissipate the spell. If somebody tried to clean it off after his body was found, there would be horrible consequences. He would have to break the magic. He owed it to whoever might find him to do that.

It took him several tries to get to his feet, with only one leg and one arm to work with; but he managed it. He got around the end of the couch and leaned against the wall. His left leg would support him if he locked the knee. One step at a time, he went back to his study. Three or four cats followed him.

Hector was sitting in his chair. He shooed the cat out so he could sit down and carefully undo one corner of the sand painting.

Why bother? Why not just wipe it out? With no one here his soul could be transferred to, it would probably mean instant oblivion. That was preferable to a lingering death. It could get unpleasant toward the end.

He reached across the desk with his right arm, and with one sweeping motion, destroyed the sand painting. The forces of the magic were unleashed, and he fell into darkness.

But not into unconsciousness. Strange gray light flashed in his eyes. His hearing seemed preternaturally sharp, especially in the super registers. He lost all sense of body position. The pain in his chest was gone.

He waited for the rushing noise, the sense of constriction, the great white light that was supposed to herald physical death. They didn't come. Instead, he seemed to be seeing out of many eyes at once, seeing his study from many angles and points at the same time.

He saw himself lying across the desk. He saw his cats, on the desk, under it, on the bookcase, by the door. It was through their eyes that he was seeing. Not just one pair of eyes, but all seven pairs at once.

Poor cats, he thought. Seven lives for one.

He scratched several ears. He looked around at his seven bodies, taking stock of the new situation. He would have to fend for himself now. If he stuck around, he would be farmed out to several people and split up, or maybe even sent to the pound.

It took him a while to learn to just let his seven bodies work by themselves. If he tried to control them too directly, he became paralyzed. If he just thought of going somewhere, one or several of him, he went, wherever he wanted to go. That implied interesting possibilities of coordinated action. It would take a while to get used to, but that was all right.

He went out into the kitchen. Several of his stomachs were empty, and the smell of the dry cat food made his mouths water. He made all of him eat as much as he could. It was going to be bugs and mice after this. He hoped his bodies would still remember how to hunt.

Time to go. One by one, he went out through the swinging cat door. The outdoors smelled wonderful. Cats didn't have long lives, but long enough. This was going to be fun.

He ran, all seven of him, across the yard behind the house, through the fence, into the meadow, and toward the woods beyond.

*The author reports that he was born in 1943, attended school in Michigan, Arizona, and California, in the course of which he acquired a B.A. in English, "never used since." He has been writing science fiction since the age of eight, although, admittedly, not selling it for that long. He now writes full time, and is the author of two published books, Planet Master and Star God, plus a monthly column in Softside magazine. He is married and has lived in North Carolina since 1972. He writes on a word processor, continues to explore the intricacies of computers, and designs rôle-playing games when he has the time.*



# ON THE REBOUND

by Jack C. Haldeman II

art: George Barr



*The author was born in Hopkinsville, KY, between Pearl Harbor Day, 1941, and Christmas. He now lives in Florida, with wife Vol, daughter Alice Lorena, and dog Jackie. He and his brother Joe collaborated on a novel, There Is No Darkness, which is being published by Ace Books.*

You got to get the ink, man. That's all there is to it. I don't care if you're the hottest shooter on the floor, it doesn't count for anything if you don't get the ink.

Now this is a secret my roommate told me when I was a freshman. He's second string center for the Knicks now and was just a little above average as a player in college. The difference was that he had his name in the paper all the time and got a lot of air play on the tube. You probably remember him. He's the guy who used to kiss the basketball before each foul shot. He told me it didn't mean anything, but it got him lots of ink. I mean, who could forget a guy who went around kissing basketballs? Everybody noticed him. He's only 6' 11" but he got a fantastic contract.

See, I want to play professional ball. It's all I wanted to do since I was ten years old. I love the squeak of sneakers across the floor and the twank of the ball against the hoop. Man, that's music to my ears. I love the crowds, all that noise: I tell you, it's beautiful. The problem is I'm only six feet tall.

I don't know what happened. Back in high school I just quit growing. I hit six feet in the ninth grade and things just stopped. I tried everything. I drove my mother crazy hanging from door frames. Nothing helped. Six feet nothing. That's it.

Nobody ever calls me Shorty, but when I get out on the court with the other guys I might as well be a midget. I give away almost a foot to everyone. Phil is 7'4" and he looks like the Empire State Building when he stands next to me. It's tough being six feet tall and a midget.

I've got drive, though. I mean, I really love the game and it shows. I hustle like crazy. But almost every college team has a guy like me — the little guy who plays his heart out. The crowd loves me, they cheer like crazy when I come off the bench. But it's a lost cause. I never get to come in unless we've got the game on ice or we're so far behind it doesn't matter. That's no way to build up a pro career.

My stats aren't bad, all things considered. Like I said, I hustle like mad. I'm a good foul shooter and have a lot of assists. I've got a killer shot from about 20 feet out. What I give away in height under the basket I make up for on the foul line and outside on the floor. I've got a good eye. Even a midget can hit the hoop.

I figured that being short, the only chance I had to make the pros was to get people to notice me. I had to get the ink and the only thing I had going for me was my hustle. I tried everything.

Once I tried playing barefoot, like the kicker on our football team. He gets interviewed all the time and he doesn't even speak English. All he does is kick sixty foot field goals barefooted. It didn't work. All the guys laughed at me and stepped on my toes. Besides, when you're as short as I am, giving up that extra inch by not wearing shoes can kill you.

I tried talking to the ball. It worked for that pitcher and it was easy to



incorporate into my hustle. I dribbled all over talking to the ball. I'd coax it and I'd curse it. I even sang to it once. Didn't work. They couldn't hear me from the press box and the other players all thought I'd slipped a cog. It's hard enough being short without being crazy too.

I tried wearing a bright bandana, but it kept slipping down over my eyes. I wore one white shoe and one blue one. I wore socks that didn't match and told everyone it was lucky. I rode a unicycle to class. I developed a high-five slap, a triple backhander that couldn't be beat. I used it after every basket until I dislocated my thumb. I tried to work on a neat little shuffle at the foul line but it threw my timing off. Nothing worked. I bet if I burst into flames at center court it wouldn't make the papers. I was starving for ink and I was too short. It was depressing.

Linda tried to cheer me up. She's 5'2" and I feel ten feet tall when we walk to class together. She's a biology major, a real brain. She doesn't know from nothing about basketball, which is probably a good thing.

"It's not the end of the world, Harry," she said. We were walking across the quad. I'd met her at the library.

"It might as well be," I said. "My senior year and look at me. What have I got?" Somebody walked up to us and tried to sell us a paper flower.

"You've almost got your degree," she said. "You've got your health."

"Fine. I'll be a healthy CPA. I'll have to watch the playoffs on TV. I can't do that, Linda."

"It's only a game," she said. "You've got your whole life in front of you."

"Basketball is my whole life," I said, steering us around a group of students with signs protesting insect experimentation.

"There are a lot of things you could do. You could play basketball in your spare time."

I groaned as we walked around some kids eating lunch on the lawn. "I can just see me shooting baskets in the gym at night. What a bummer."

We walked up the steps to the biology building and I went along with her to the lab. Sometimes I hang around with her while she works. It keeps my mind off my problems. She's in a work-study program and does all sorts of things for Dr. Guilford, the University's resident kook.

Actually, I shouldn't be so hard on him. He's a little strange, that's all. I kind of like him. He's always got a million experiments going at the same time. He gets a lot of ink in the local paper, and I have to admire that.

Linda put on a white lab coat and started washing test tubes and petri dishes. She's tried to explain some of the experiments to me but I don't understand that stuff. I don't know biology from bananas. On the other hand I bet the doc can't sink 'em from the outside like I can. To each his own, I always say.

The doc came in and he was muttering to himself as he usually does. Linda and I talked about my fading career while he walked around the lab

looking at all the experiments and mumbling under his breath. It was five minutes before he noticed us and said hello. Linda had finished washing the glassware and was pouring something into something else. He sat down with us and lit his pipe, scattering ashes all over everything.

"How are you kids today?" he asked between puffs.

"Fine," said Linda.

"Not so hot," I said, coughing. That tobacco really stunk. He smoked the cheapest stuff he could find.

"What's wrong, Harry?" His head was lost in a cloud of smoke.

"Everything," I grumped.

"Let's not get started on that," said Linda.

The doc waved her aside with his pipe. "No, let me hear what he has to say," he said. "The boy has problems and I love problems. Problems are the root of all science. Biology is full of problems. I love biology. I love problems. Just the other day I had a wonderful one."

"The season's about to start, doc, and I don't have a chance. I'll be lost in the crowd."

"Football season already?" he asked. "Time sure flies."

"Basketball," I said. "I play basketball."

"Oh, yes. Jump shots and all that. I know basketball. Aren't you a little short for basketball? I thought you had to be tall for that."

"Tell me about it," I said. "That's half my problem."

"He wants to play professional basketball," said Linda. "It's a crazy dream he has."

"A dream?" I shouted. "It's no dream, it's my life. I don't want to be a CPA, I want to play for the Knicks in the Garden. I want to be in the big time."

"You seem to be a little short," said Dr. Guilford. "Not to get personal, but how tall are you?"

"Six feet on a good day," I said.

"Would being taller help much?" he asked.

"That, along with some ink, would help."

"Ink?" he asked.

"You know, publicity. Getting my name in the paper, my face on the tube, that kind of thing. I'm a good player but I just don't get the ink. Being short doesn't help."

He sipped on his pipe for a second, staring off into space. I think he forgot about me. He has this absent look he gets when he's thinking about his work. A bomb could go off and he wouldn't notice. His pipe gurgled.

"I'd better check the grasshoppers," he said and got up. Linda and I watched him leave the lab.

"Grasshoppers?" I asked her.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know about that one," she said. "He's got so many things going at once I can't keep track of them."

Linda went back to her work and I went back to my blue funk. If I only had a gimmick I wouldn't need to be tall. If I was tall I wouldn't need a gimmick. And if I had wings I could fly. Grump.

Linda was in a good mood. She likes biology and was humming as she walked around the lab, talking to the white rats and messing with beakers and flasks. That's one of the things I like best about her. She's a happy person.

Me, I can carry a grump for hours, longer if it's a big one. I was still fussed when Dr. Guilford came back. He had a box with him and set it on the lab bench.

"Yes," he said.

"Yes what?" I asked.

"Just yes. Look in the box, Harry."

I lifted a corner and peeked inside. I couldn't believe what I saw.

"What is it?" asked Linda, coming over.

"A grasshopper," I said.

"That's a big box for a grasshopper," she said.

"It's a big grasshopper." That much was true.

"Nine pounds," said Dr. Guilford. "That's the biggest one so far."

"How'd it get so big?" I asked.

"Science, Harry, science."

"How come you used a grasshopper?" asked Linda, taking a peek inside the box.

"They're cheaper than rats," he said.

"Who'd want a nine pound grasshopper?" I asked.

"I never thought about that," said Dr. Guilford, scratching his head.

"I'm a whiz at pure research, but that practical stuff gets right by me."

"How'd you do that?" asked Linda, poking her finger inside the box. She was curious about everything.

"It's simple, really," he said, turning to me. "Harry, what are you made out of?"

That caught me off guard. "Bones and blood, stuff like that, I guess." Like I said, I don't know much about biology.

"Most of you is nothing," he said.

"Wait a minute . . ."

"No, Harry, just listen. You're made up of atoms, billions of atoms. And atoms are mostly nothing, dead air space. You can ask anyone, they'll tell you that."

I looked at Linda and she nodded. I wanted to make sure the old man wasn't pulling my leg. I don't know much about physics or chemistry, either.

"What I've developed is a compound that increases the space between all those atoms. Everything gets bigger."

"That's wonderful," said Linda. "When are you going to publish it?"

"That's the problem," said Dr. Guilford. "The University doesn't officially allow experimentation with insects. I could get in a lot of trouble if I published what I've done. I need to try it on animals. It ought to work."

"Would it work on people?" asked Linda.

The doc nodded. "I don't see why not."

"Would it work on Harry?" she asked.

"Wait a minute," I said. They ignored me, caught up in the rosy glow of science at work.

"Yes," he said. "If it worked on a grasshopper it would probably work on Harry."

"Hold on," I said. "That's me you're talking about."

"Don't you see," said Linda. "This is the answer to both of your problems. You get tall and you get famous at the same time. He would be famous, wouldn't he, Dr. Guilford?"

"Without a doubt. I have a fantastic track record of publications. I've been in *Science* seven times. He'd be a bigger sensation than the Elephant Man."

I wasn't sure I liked the sound of *that*. Still, ink was ink, no matter what the source. I would have preferred *Sports Illustrated* to *Science*, but beggars can't be choosers. Just so long as they spelled my name right.

"Are you sure you can do it?" I asked.

"Of course," he said. He sounded a little insulted.

"Will it hurt?"

"Not at all," he said. "The grasshopper never complained." Linda was beaming. She got all excited over science. Me, on the other hand, I had my doubts. Playing backup to a grasshopper was probably not without its risks. Still, this could be my ticket to the big time. I could almost hear the roar in Madison Square Garden as they introduced me. *The Garden!* My doubts wavered in front of the image.

"When does the season start?" asked Linda.

"Tonight," I said.

"We'd better get started," said Dr. Guilford.

They led me down the hall to his private lab. I didn't like the way that Dr. Guilford swung his pipe around while he was mixing chemicals. He seemed a little too casual to me. The mixture he handed me was foaming and had little flecks of pipe tobacco floating in it.

"How much taller do you want to be?" he asked.

"About a foot would be nice," I said.

"Then drink about half of that."

It looked terrible. For a second I just stood there. I closed my eyes and thought of all that ink. They'd notice me for sure. I held my breath and tipped the glass back. It was awful stuff. It burned on the way down and made my eyes water.

"Yuck," I said, putting the glass down. Linda looked real excited and the doc was taking notes.

"When will it start?" I asked.

"It already has," said Dr. Guilford.

I looked at my hand and saw that he was right. My fingers were growing longer as I watched. I felt real funny. My nose started moving away from my face. The room seemed to sink, but I knew it was me getting taller. I watched the bones in my arm get longer. It was great, better than that werewolf movie. My t-shirt split open and my pants ripped. My tennis shoes tore apart. Linda climbed up on a stool and took the gold chain off my neck just before it strangled me. While she was up there she gave me a kiss.

"Wow," she said.

I could see what she meant. My head bumped the ceiling just as I stopped growing. Strange.

"It worked," said Linda.

"Of course," said Dr. Guilford.

"How tall am I?" I asked.

"About eight feet," said Dr. Guilford. "I guess I made it a little strong."

"Eight feet," I said with wonder. I flexed my fingers and did a couple of deep knee bends. Everything seemed to be working right. I would tear them apart on the courts, no doubt about it.

"What's next?" I asked.

"Next we get you something to wear," said Dr. Guilford.

He was right. My clothes hung in shreds and were pretty useless. I was a little embarrassed, but Linda didn't seem to notice. She was jumping up and down, hugging Dr. Guilford, saying how excited she was that the experiment worked. Like I said, she was a big fan of science.

The only thing they could find that even came close to covering me was an extra-large lab coat. It stopped about a foot above my knees, but I managed to get across campus to my dorm without getting arrested for indecent exposure.

That night I had to dig around a lot to find a uniform that would fit me. Everyone was blown away by how tall I was. It was great.

"What happened, Harry?" asked the coach.

"Growth spurt," I mumbled, having promised Dr. Guilford I wouldn't say anything until his article came out in *Science*.

"Since this morning?" he asked.

"I'm a growing boy," I said and he walked away, kind of stunned.

"Far out," said Phil, the 7' 4" center as he came over to his locker. "Put on a couple inches, didn't you?"

"Vitamins," I said. "It's all vitamins." It was great to look down on him.

The rest of the team just sat there staring at me. I mean, what can you say to a guy you've known for years who suddenly grows a couple of feet taller? The coach gave us his pep talk and I noticed he kept looking at me and shaking his head.

There was a last-minute juggling of the starting lineup and I wasn't surprised to find myself out there right from the beginning. The coach would have been crazy not to put an 8-foot player on the floor.

It was great. I was everywhere. From the opening tipoff I controlled the game. I hustled and I shot. Nothing could get by me. I owned the backboards. The crowd went wild. Never before had I had such a perfect night. I could do no wrong.

I could intimidate a 7-foot player just by standing over him. My teammates passed to me every chance they got. I was hot, *hot*. I could see Linda sitting in the bleachers with Dr. Guilford and that made me extra proud. You should have seen my slam dunks, they were truly inspired. It wasn't even halftime yet and I had scored 40 points.

They tried everything to stop me. They double-teamed me. They tried full court pressing, they tried man-to-man. They tried speeding up the game and they tried slowing it down. Nothing worked. I was hot. Not even the zone could save them.

I was standing under the basket and Phil passed another one toward me. There was a loud shout from the crowd and I knew something had gone wrong, but I didn't know what. All of a sudden everyone looked huge. My feet flopped out of my shoes and I realized what had happened. I had shrunk. My uniform hung on me like a burlap bag. I looked up and saw Phil's perfect pass sail over my head. I went for it but got tangled up in my uniform. I figure I was about four feet tall then. It hurt to see the ball go out of bounds, but what could I do?

I just stood there, dazed, while they put the ball back into play. Then, as quickly as I'd shrunk, I started growing again. I hit eight feet and kept on going. My head got stuck in the net. It was a mess and the play was going down toward the other goal. I got myself untangled and headed down the court. But it wasn't as simple as that.

As I ran down the floor I kept growing and shrinking. Up and down, up and down; sometimes I was three feet tall, sometimes twelve. My stride was off since I never knew how long my legs were going to be. By the time I'd stumbled down to the other end the visiting team had scored and everyone was headed back my way again. I shrank six feet in front of their corner man and he freaked out, but other than that I wasn't much use.

The buzzer ended the half and when the team ran off to the locker room I ran over to Linda and Dr. Guilford.

"What's happening?" I said, growing two feet as I stood in front of them.

"That's very interesting," said Dr. Guilford.

"Interesting? What's happening to me?"

"You seem to be shrinking and-expanding."

"I can see that," I said.

"A very interesting side effect," said Dr. Builford. "It never happened with the grasshopper."

"I don't care about your grasshopper," I said. "What's going to happen to me?"

"You'll shrink and expand, of course. It will make an excellent footnote to my paper."

"I don't care about your footnotes," I shouted, suddenly shrinking five feet. "How long will I be this way?"

"Not too long," he said.

"How long is not too long?" I asked. "This is pretty upsetting."

"It should wear off in about ten years or so," said Dr. Builford. "I wouldn't worry about it."

Ten years. Of course he wouldn't worry about it. On the other hand, I had some adjusting to do.

On the whole I think I've adjusted pretty well. I didn't play much more that night, but I did get into a few games after that. People loved the way I went up and down like a yo-yo.

Linda helped me make some elastic clothes and that was a big improvement. I have a lot of trouble going through doors, though, I never know if I'm going to bump my head or not. I keep sliding off of chairs and knocking stuff over. I have to be careful when I'm reaching for my coffee because my arm might decide to grow and I'll tip it over. Sometimes I'm huge and sometimes I'm small. I can never tell which it's going to be and the only thing I can be sure of is that it'll change in a few minutes. I don't know how Linda puts up with me. I guess one of the things she loves about me is that I'm a scientific miracle. Like I said, she's big on science.

Dr. Guilford's article got published and he's pretty famous now, I guess. We don't see much of him anymore. He left for Johns Hopkins right after the article came out in *Science*. They let him work with insects at Johns Hopkins, so I guess it's an all right place. Still, I liked the article in *Sports Illustrated* better. It had pictures.

My senior year's about up and I'm still not sure where I'm going from here. I got a job offer from Circus World, but I'm not all that excited about it. The money's good, but my heart's not in it.

I sent a bunch of clippings to the Knicks. They ought to be able to use a twelve-foot basketball player, even if he's only twelve feet tall some of the time. I still want to play in the Garden.

At least I'm getting the ink.





# THE AMAZING YEARS

by Cele Goldsmith Lalli

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How appealing to my own sense of wonder to be invited to write something for *Amazing Stories* 17 years (to the very cover date) after my last issue as editor of the magazine. My connection with Ziff-Davis — publishers of *Amazing* from 1939 to 1965 — continues to this day, but my involvement in science fiction ended with the June 1965 editions of *Amazing* and *Fantastic*.

I was just out of college when Howard Browne hired me as his secretary in 1955. My qualifications — I could type. My interest in science fiction — I had recently seen and enjoyed the movie *The Day The Earth Stood Still*. However, I loved to read good stories and it didn't take me long to realize that much of what was being published in the two magazines was hacked out according to formula. Within a year Howard left for Hollywood and Paul Fairman took over. With Paul, I became managing editor and in this capacity was responsible for reading the unsolicited manuscripts. In the avalanche of mostly terrible prose, occasional worthy fiction would emerge. I acknowledged it quickly and publication of heretofore unknowns began. The trend became self-perpetuating. We only paid 1¢ per word, but writers could count on a fast Z-D check — sufficient incentive!

When Paul left in 1958, all ves-

tiges of the past went with him; we moved into the new wave. With Norman Lobsenz as the consultant who penned editorials and wrote blurbs for the stories I bought, we began publishing innovative material by "newcomers" Piers Anthony, Ben Bova, David R. Bunch, Tom Disch, Larry Eisenberg, Phyllis Gotlieb, John Jakes, Keith Laumer, Ursula Le Guin, and Roger Zelazny. Early writers in *Amazing* and *Fantastic*, pros like Asimov, Brackett, Bradbury, Hamilton, Leinster, Leiber, to name a few, were aware of the changes in the magazines, saw them as valuable, and began to write for *Amazing* and *Fantastic* once again. Currently popular writers — Anderson, Ellison, Garrett, Silverberg — were glad to be among the ranks of *Amazing's* authors.


My greatest pleasure was developing and publishing new, talented writers. I was not a writer and never aspired to be. But I was an editor who loved to help writers adapt their ideas and copy for the audience. My requirements: credible (or incredible), well-plotted, carefully developed stories. My criteria for acceptance: "goose flesh" while reading a submission. Each time that happened I knew we had a winner. Between 1959 and 1965 we had many winners which the science fiction world recognized with several special awards presented at lo-

cal and national conventions. A result of these accolades was my personal commitment to continue providing the highest quality science fiction in this market.

On my study shelves today are the hundreds of issues of *Amazing* and *Fantastic* that I edited, on my walls hang four framed original paintings of covers, daily reminders of those special years.

I'm often asked if I miss science fiction. Of course I do. And what I miss most is the contact with the many writers who became my

friends. I confess to feeling a bit smug in the private knowledge that much of their success occurred because I was, at one time, their only reader and their most important audience.

After a long hiatus I welcome this opportunity to greet them and all the grand masters of science fiction and fantasy with whom I was privileged to work. And I want to extend my very best wishes to George Scithers as *Amazing* begins yet another life. 

## **THERE IS AN INDEX BY FIRST LINES**

from **The Best-Loved Poems of  
the American People**

There's a race of men that don't fit in  
There's a quaint little place called Lullaby Town  
There's a path that leads to Nowhere  
There's a one-eyed yellow idol to the north of Khatmandu  
There's a graveyard near the White House  
There's a gathering in the village, that has never been outdone  
There's a game much in fashion — I think it's called Euchre  
There's a comforting thought at the close of the day  
There's a breathless hush in the Close tonight  
There's a bit of sky across the street  
There is sorrow enough in the natural way  
There is so much good in the worst of us  
There is no death! The stars go down  
There is no chance, no destiny, no fate  
There is a time, we know not when  
There is a plan far greater than the plan you know  
There is a destiny that makes us brothers  
There are two kinds of people on Earth today  
There are loyal hearts, there are spirits brave  
There are hermit souls that live withdrawn

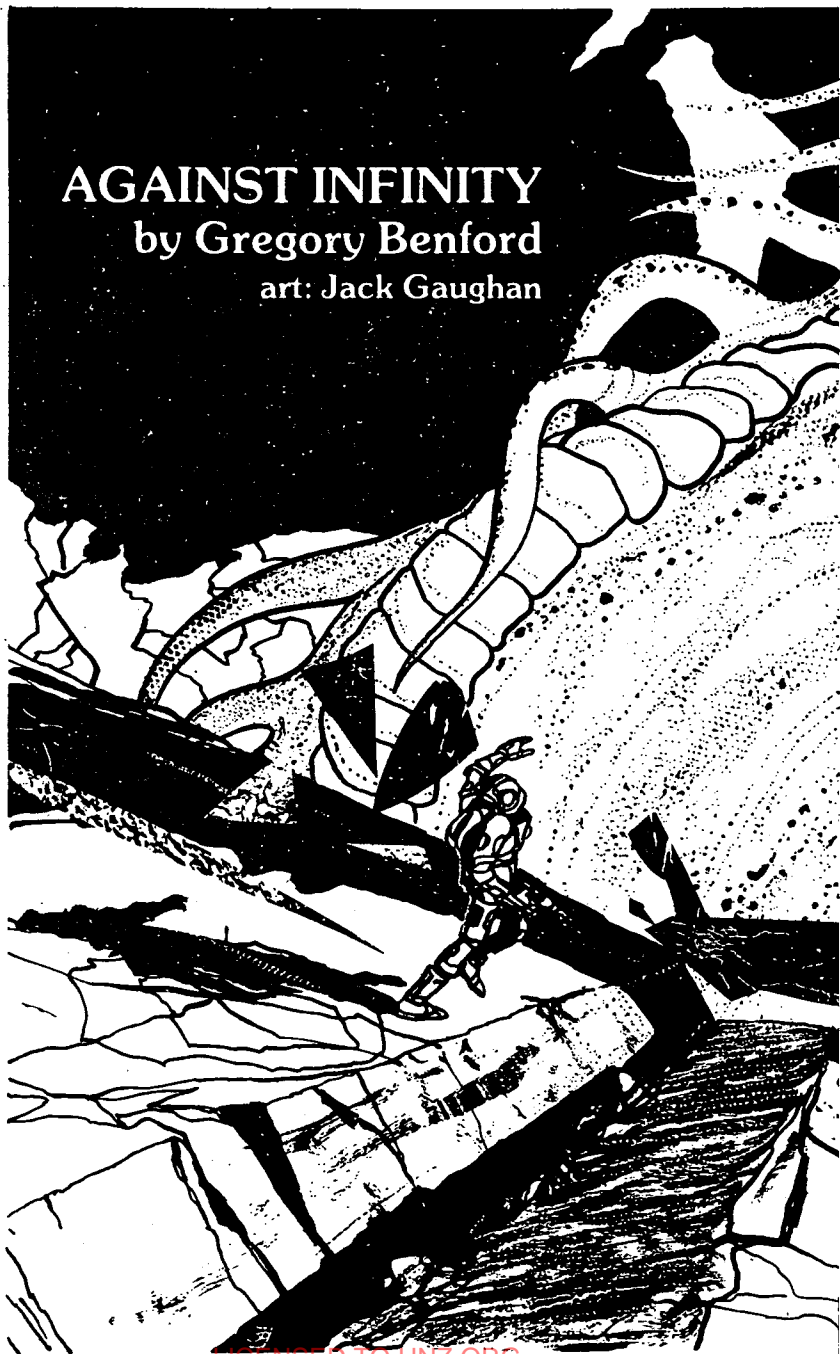
**— Tom Disch**

**The Amazing Years 117**

# AGAINST INFINITY

by Gregory Benford

art: Jack Gaughan





LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They went out from Sidon Settlement in a straggling band, clanking and crunching over the hardpacked, worn-down purple plain. The ice near Sidon had been melted and frozen and remelted again and again by orbit shuttle landings and by the heater exhausts of passing crawlers, so that now it was speckled and mottled with rainbow splashes and big blotches of contaminants. Out over this crusty trampled ice they went, carrying the boy Manuel. Inside their wheezing and huffing machines they sang and shoved each other and early got into the smearlop and whiskey, as they always did.

The boy was thirteen. He watched it all with wide eyes. For five years now he had waited and listened to the talk of the ice ridges and ammonia rivers of the melting land, quick and treacherous under the feet. Hunkered down around a heater, evening after evening, he had listened, not knowing how much to believe but wanting to trust it all for fear of forgetting anything he might need later, for he knew even then that everything you learned came to use if you waited. What he knew most deeply was the bigness of the wilderness they now crawled into, bigger than any of the puny human Settlements, vast and powerful and with a reason and logic to itself. Ganymede — the biggest moon in the solar system, with nearly as much land and ice as old worn Earth, but fresh and unmarked by man until the last two centuries. Manuel heard the talk and thought of the big trackless wastes and knew the talk was empty, no matter who it came from: from the new Earthers who'd swarmed in a few years back, eager to hack and chip away at the vast ice mountains in search of metals and seams of rare elements; from the biotechnicians who brought the metaformed animals, sure the beasts would find here a new place to yip and labor and take the burden from the humans; from the older settlers (like Petrovich), who had heaved up the big hydroponics domes and now hummed away inside them, growing the food and weaving the organics, and were fatuous enough to believe they had any more hold on the huge cold wilderness than the ones brand new off the shuttle; from the olders, men and women who'd sent out the first fusion-busters to put the land to rake and fire; from the survivors older still, of whom Manuel knew only Old Matt Bohles, with his gravel voice and slow, stooped walk, who talked little but whose eyes were liquid and rheumy with tales; from all the waves of humans who had washed over the face of Ganymede and then seeped away, most of them, leaving behind only those who had the strength to endure and the humility to learn the skills and to fight the awful and unforgiving cold.

In the first hours the wiseass veneer rubbed away from him. He watched the smearlop going down and even tried a drab, grinning, but it was not to his liking yet and he thought with some relief that that was about right anyway. In the thick close air of the cabin the stench and sweat of the men seemed to tighten around him, and he contented himself

with watching out the big ports, where the augmented and servo'd animals rumpused about on the pocked plain. A dime-sized sun struck colors from their carapaces, steels gleaming blue-green, the ceramics a clammy yellow. They frolicked at being out of Sidon Settlement again, beyond the domes where they bent their backs at agro work, their reward being the blunt pleasures of food and sex and cartoon stories and sensos in the off-hours. But none of that gave the zest of romping free in the thin air outside, scampering around the lumbering crawler treads, whistling and chattering and sending their clipped cries to each other in the stinging cold. They had been in their multiplex servo'd pods so long that Manuel could hardly remember what their basic bodies were. Short Stuff was a chimp, maybe, and The Barron a kind of thoroughbred dog as near as he could make out. The others were pigs or dolphins or something else. Often the animals themselves did not know. With their truncated bodies and regrown cerebella and cerebra ballooned into nearly human-40 IQ, they were confused yet far smarter than before, eager to use their abilities. They had been Skinnered into mild, subservient behavior. They gladly did jobs a robot couldn't or a man wouldn't, and were taintless in their ardor for the work.

"Good to let them come," Manuel said to his father, Colonel Lopez.

"Ay. Watch they don't get seized up in the treads. Or trip one of the walkers."

Up the crumpled ridge they went, rising with a wrenching sway above the big plain so that, looking back, they could make out the sprawl and glimmer of Sidon Settlement like a jeweled handkerchief thrown down by a passing giant. The talk began again. It was, as usual, about policing the jackrabs and rockeaters and the ammonia-soaked scooters and the crawlies that processed methane, for that was the ostensible purpose of this annual expedition. But soon the talk drifted as though drawn by the same current that ran through all of them to the best game of all, the best subject for listening and the best for thinking as the blue-white wastes tilted by outside. He had heard it before, the voices at first quiet and filled with weight and with a deliberate easing up on the subject as the Settlement fell behind, recollection floating up in them like bubbles breaking on the surface of a deep pond. Even though still a boy, he had heard the tales in squatters' shacks hardly able to hold their pressure; and in agro domes; in work sheds rank with metal shavings and sour spit; in living rooms where the women who had been on the hunt in the past would talk, too, but not the same way; and in growing tanks where men chopped at the ever-expanding mass of inert turkey meat as big as a walker and steaming with fat-glazed ooze — had heard the frightful stories and seen the occasional well-thumbed fax photos and known that what came down to him was from an age long before anything he could know. He sensed that something was waiting for him when he would at

last be allowed to come out from the small and insignificant encrustations that man had spattered over the mute face of Ganymede, come out to take part in the pruning of the small creatures and find in the vast wastes the thing that waited, that was a part of what Ganymede held for humans. Because he was born here he had inherited more than the Earthers who had come late. He had left to him, without ever seeing it, the big luminous artifact with the jagged beam-cut slash and the V-shaped runners that in the millions of square kilometers of Ganymede had earned a name that held respect and some terror, for it was not like the other ruined and time-worn pieces of alien handiwork that were strewn through the whole Jovian satellite system. They called it Aleph. Some Jew had given it that, a blank name that was the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet: a neutral vowel that bespoke the opaque nature of the blocky, gravid thing, the bulk that humans had tried to write upon with their cutters and tractors and had left no mark. A neutral name, and yet it was the source of a long legend of domes cracked open and rifled, of walkers and crawlers and even whole outposts caught up and crushed and trampled as it moved forward on its own oblivious missions, or else homes and sheds ripped apart as the thing rose up out of the ice where it dwelled, walls split by the heaving of the land as it broke free of ice and poked its angular face — eyeless, with only sawtoothed openings to mark what men chose in their ignorance to call a face and so to take away some fragment of its strangeness — breaking freshly again into the dim sunlight, seeking, always seeking materials men also needed and had compacted into their homes and factories, and thus were forced to futilely defend against the legend that came for the metals and rare rock, the Aleph making no distinction between what men held and what the bare plains offered, so that it took where it found and thus made the continuing legend of alarms ignored and traps brushed aside and servo'd armaments smashed and animals mangled and men and women injured and laser and even electron-beam bolts delivered at point-blank range as though into nothing, the alien absorbing all and giving nothing, shrugging off the puny attempts of men to deliver death to it, and without pause it kept going — down a corridor of ruin and destruction starting back before Manuel was born and even before Old Matt, the massive thing lumbered, not swift but with a ruthless determination like a machine and yet like a man, too, moving onward eternally on some course humans could not guess, it ran forever in the boy's dreams, a vast immemorial alabaster shape.

To Manuel it rose above the wilderness of ice and stone and became bigger than the barren blankness, more significant than this slate-grey moon that men had begun to scratch at. He had seen the ruts in the ice and even, once, clearly cut into the hard rock, a delta-shaped print the Aleph sometimes left, where an appendage that might be a foot or might be a



kind of feeder — no one knew — bit down and took something from the soil wherever it went, moving by means that even highspeed cameras could not fix, gliding at times and at others just lumbering, seeming to shift the huge weight from side to side of the irregular chipped and scoured body, grainy and yet unlike rock in that its color changed through the years, so that the old prints showed a custard-colored wedge of fast-moving luminescence; and then as the men tracked it better and brought faster optical instruments and the scientific teams came down from the research satellites nearer in to Jupiter, they got it more firmly fixed. It was bigger than five walkers together and used many things to move: quick strong leglike extrusions; electromagnetic repulsors that sank fields into iron-rich meteor fragments and hurled them behind it; hole-borers for traversing the ice; a thing like a propeller that would carry it into the deep slush and liquid that lay beneath the seventy kilometers of sheet ice that encased Ganymede; treads on one side; levitating fields —all used when needed, carrying the thing stolidly through gangs of hooting men and packs of servo'd but useless animals, through metal and rock as though they were butter, through teams of scientists with carefully-wrought deadfalls and immobilizing streams of electricity, through generations of futile plans and expeditions that tried to study it, slow it, stop it, kill it. Revenge was a part of the legend, debts that needed payment for Settlements ruined and limbs severed and lives wrecked and torment suffered, human misery spreading endless in its wake. But after generations the scientists discovered more interesting artifacts on the moons far out from Jupiter — or at least less dangerous ones — and they went there to study things which did not move or hurt or shrug them off. The Aleph was beyond them and they invented a theory that it was a mindless marauding thing, damaged but still dangerous, fulfilling no function beyond naked existence, left over from the millennia when the still-unknown aliens came. The aliens had built a mechanism for seeding Jupiter with simple, edible life — reworking whole moons, laying down a foundation for some future use that had not yet come. Once labeled, the inert artifacts could be forgotten by the men and women who struggled to live on the moons. They were alone at the rim of the human universe, pressed against an infinity that did not bear contemplation. The scientists left the Aleph for a later time, perhaps hoping it would simply wear down and die and become a safe numb object for study, like the rest.

Petrovich called out to him, "Hey there, little Lopez! Let's us see some frittins, hey?"

Manuel went to help with the food. He didn't mind work and knew that was a quality that would get him through times where merely being clever would not, so he bore down on that and made it his own. Hail rattled on the hull of the crawler. He watched the landscape as he worked at cutting the stock tubes of vegetables, feeling the warm kitchen blower while

outside a slow drizzle came in from the north. This was the way he would remember later going into the wilderness for the first time — an endless oncoming wall of water hail and ammonia drops, less ammonia now than years back, now that the scooters were eating it and farting out water-soluble compounds less hostile to man. The sun was rising, only twelve hours into the week-long extension of Ganymede's "day," stretching blue shadows across a flat vast crater bottom. He was in the lead crawler, which except for its creaking seemed suspended, as a solitary boat hangs alone on a placid sea and awaits the tide. The crawler rocked the way he imagined ships did, though he had not seen an ocean and never would. Old Matt came forward to get some soup and saw him watching the far rim of the crater come nearer, seeming to rise up out of a blank flatness and throw arms out to embrace the small party.

"You brought the potshotter." Old Matt did not make it a question. He had the quality of knowing the way things would be, no matter how small, so that his questions were just statements that you acknowledged with a nod.

"No good against it," Manuel murmured. "Don't know why I brought it."

"Practice. Always you need practice. The shot will be no use but the aim is."

Petrovich overheard and called, "Don't tell us you think you get a chance so soon? I am laughing. Only I should be crying."

Manuel said, "Come on. I didn't mean —"

"Sure you did! Ever' boy come out here, he means to *kill* it. Only, you lissen to me." Petrovich leaned forward, bottle on his knee, the air rank with him. "You'll freeze solid as iron when you see it. Which won't be for long."

"Microsec, maybe," Major Sanchez murmured.

"Right! But lissen. Be lucky if you even *see* it."

"I know."

"It comes, *zap*, it's gone."

Old Matt said softly, "Not always."

"Oh, sure! Sometimes it takes its time, tramples somebody."

"Not what I meant."

"Not true, anyway," Colonel Lopez put in. "It doesn't hurt people on purpose. The statisticians showed that."

"Lissen, it's a lot smarter than those statis — statis —" The green and brown liquid had hold of his tongue. Petrovich blinked and closed his mouth and let the smeerlop work on him.

"No sign it's smarter, none at all," Manuel said.

"I think the point is that we are not out here to settle the question," Manuel's father said clearly. He was the leader and it was up to him to put a stamp on the conversation. "We are to test the new mutations, prune

them, and perhaps to take some live samples."

"Or dead ones," Major Sanchez said.

"True. Or dead ones. But you all know the Survey does not permit hunting for sport."

"Plenty crawlies," Major Sanchez whispered, so that the words could be heard but did not have to be acknowledged by the Colonel.

"Crawlers are still needed. There is a lot of rock for them to break down." The Colonel turned to Sanchez. "We shoot only mutes, si? Not good crawlies."

"Hey no, I was just thinkin' — "

"Think otherwise," Colonel Lopez growled, and the talk was over for a while.

They went on. Over the ruined, once-jagged ramparts of the ancient crater. Through a wrinkled valley of tumbled stone caught in russet snowdrifts. Across a jumbled plain, still pitted with craters that the thin, warming atmosphere had not yet erased. And finally to the first camp, the boy passing through the wastes as though they were opening momentarily to accept him and then closing behind him, sealing the lip of the world so that in all directions there was only the splotched ice, rocks nested in the hills, and the steady hail and rain that brought to this moon the first hint of what having air would mean, when the humans were through. None of this was strange to Manuel, since he had often thought of it and sensed what it must be like. The camp was a rambling shack, with seams welded crudely and compressors that grunted and whined into life. It took hours to warm it up; and he labored with the rest to patch fresh leaks and fix circuitry, all with the odd seeping sensation of foreknown acts, of living something he already knew. He ate the field provisions the men swore over; but he found them tasty, different from the Settlement ration, gamy with spices the Cong cook put in. He slept in roughfiber bedrolls left over from the days when they killed the heat at night to save ergs, and found them warmer than his bed at home. The shack snapped and popped with the cold relentlessly seeping in. He felt it as a weight trying to crush and break through the thin layers men carried with them. It kept waking him. A thin wind moaned at the corners, and he listened for the sound of something else beyond it, and while he strained to hear he fell asleep. After a timeless interval morning came. The men began to grunt and cough and started to finally get up and stamp their feet to bring the circulation back.

For breakfast they had sharp-root and coffee and lurkey. The heavy smells mingled, stirring Manuel's stomach until it growled. The lurkey was good — thick slices cut from the old slab at Sidon, meat that still had cells in it from the first turkey to survive the voyage out. For years the original Settlement families from Old Mexico had lived on it and very little else.

The men ate with concentration, smacking their lips and hardly talking, until the Colonel started outlining the day's jobs.

Petrovich murmured, "I rather throw sights down on crawlle mutations, Colonel."

Before Col. Lopez could reply Major Sanchez said irritably, "You heard what he said last night."

"Uh. Cannot remember it."

"You remember pouring smearlop down that gullet, eh?"

"Best Swedish stuff. Trivial alcohol content."

Major Sanchez grunted. "Nice word, 'trivial.' Means you got it — *cojones* — you got no worry. If you don't —"

"Lay off him," the Colonel said mildly.

"I don't want hangover-head here shooting at crawlies around *me*."

"I say it again, for last time," the Colonel's voice had a firm edge to it. "Scooters we're paid to prune, scooters we do."

Petrovich muttered, "Ugly things. Centipede with armor, color of pile of shit."

Major Sanchez said, "Hiruko makes 'em to work, not for pets."

"Ever smell one? Get some on your suit, come back inside, make you puke —"

"You can get sick on your own time," the Colonel said. "We're not paid to criticize."

Major Sanchez laughed. "Si, or we might remember those street-cleaners you wanted Sidon to adopt, eh Petrovich?" There was low chuckling around the table. "Big as bear, knock over people to get trash —"

"We can get started now?" Petrovich said abruptly, standing up. "Too much dumb talk."

They spread out from camp, into the territory south of Angeles Crater. The Colonel supervised the sample-taking, which was fine by the men because that was the worst job, dull and methodical, and they got enough of that kind of work at the Settlement. They went after the scooters. BioEngineering had put out a Spec Report on the long crawly things five months back. Scooters had been designed to soak up ammonia-based compounds and digest them into oxy-available ones. They searched out their foul-smelling foods in streams and pools, or chewed ice if they got desperate, and then shat steady acrid streams that Bio said would be good for plants and even animals in the long run. Trouble was, the scooters' long chain DNA didn't make good copies of itself. They mated furiously. Half of the broods lately were deformed, or demented, or didn't eat the right compounds. Bio was picking up variant, unwanted varieties living off the excreta of the others, like pigs rooting through cowflop.

There were two ways to counter that. Bio could make a new third animal that would compete with the warped scooters. That would introduce a further complication into the biosphere, with further

unforeseen side effects. On the other hand, Bio could hire the Settlements to knock off the mutations by hunting. The Colonel had gone through negotiations with Hiruko, the central authority on Ganymede. The bookkeeping between Sidon and Hiruko was complicated. Manuel could remember his father staying up nights at the terminal, frowning and pulling at his moustache and swearing to himself. When the boy saw his father that way it was hard to think of him as the Colonel, a distant figure who commanded an automatic respect in the Settlement. Manuel unconsciously felt that it was his father who fretted and worried late at night, and another figure entirely, The Colonel, who finally made the deal with Hiruko Central. He had gotten a fair price for Sidon to go out and hunt down the mutes. The hunting won because it was cheaper than engineering a third animal.

That morning Manuel went with Old Matt, who was slow and had the patience to teach. A walker dropped them off fifteen clicks from the base shack. They got out in an ice arroyo. They bent over to secure their vacuum seals and a fog rose around them as the walker thumped away. The thin air was laden with rising orange fumes as the midget sun struck the far wall. There was not much life here, only some rockjaws scraping at gravel. They were like four-legged birds with chisel beaks, pecking away at ice, swallowing automatically, animals like engines, beyond the time-locked dictates of Darwin. They had a few defenses against predators; the awkward gray forms did not even look up as the humans clumped by. They scattered, though, when Old Matt scuffed up pebbles; they were blind but could hear dimly through their feet.

Manuel saw the first scooter but it was all right, normal, a low flat thing with crab legs and a mouth that was a blur as it slurped at a runoff stream. It ignored them. They marched for an hour without seeing more than gray sheets of rock and ice and a gully scraped out by a fusion crawler years before and now run dry. The hills slumped down and the valley bled away into a plain and there they found a flock of scooters, all furiously sucking at the ponds of condensed vapor far back in the blue shadows. It was a quiet, placid scene. Old Matt pointed. Far away, skittering among the hummocks, Manuel saw pale yellow flat shapes.

"Bring up that potter gun slow. Slant it up and stand fast."

"Pretty far off. I don't think I can hit 'em."

"They'll come to us. Following the normal ones, so they got to pass by over to left. Stand still and they won't skit off."

Sure enough, the low fast forms came, dodging among the normal forms, eager amid the rocks and ice bulges. There were five, all marked a little differently with red and black stripes and dots. They jerked with energy and random impetus.

"Fast evolving," Old Matt murmured softly. "Got their own mating crests — see on the first one? — and look at the steam rise from that shit of

theirs."

It was a pearly pink vapor. "Converting the scooter crap back into ammonia-based?" Manuel asked.

"Or worse." Old Matt eyed them. "You take the last one."

"The lead one's closer."

"Sure. And when they see it fall they'll scatter. Always work from their rear."

Manuel brought the little popper up slowly, so as not to startle them. He aimed, squinted, and got the form in the sights as it ducked and bobbed, snatching at each morsel of excretion. It was disgusting to watch, the boy thought; but when you thought about it everything alive was eating the shit of something else, in the long run.

He fired. The warpscooter crumpled. He shifted to the next and saw it disintegrate as Old Matt got it. Then the group must have heard or felt something because they dodged this way and that, skipping along on their fast little legs, scrambling into the blue shadows. Manuel led one of them and fired three times, kicking up a quick jet of vapor from the ice each time where he missed. He caught the thing just as it got into the shadow of a boulder. The bolt went clean through its brown armor. *Good*, he thought. He swung the gun back and there was nothing left to shoot at. Old Matt had hit the rest.

He felt proud on the long march back to the camp. They got another flock in late afternoon, surprising mutes in a gully, but then the mutants ran and got in among the regular scooters and Old Matt pushed the boy's popper aside before he could shoot any more.

"Bio's strict about killing the reg'lars."

"Okay." Manuel walked on, cradling the gun, watching the dumb forms scuttle for cover.

"Safety."

Manuel replied, "I might get a squint at one if it breaks cover."

"It's then, when you're trying for the one extra, that bellies get sliced and feet blown off."

Meekly he powered-down and slipped on the safety, deliberately looking away from the jittering, mindless flock still seeking shadow. He sloughed on, a half step behind the man, through the glinting Ganymede morning, homing on the endlessly beeping directional for the camp.

It was more than a week before he and Old Matt heard the animals. They were out on their own, running flocks of scooters when they could find them, the man teaching Manuel how to move and where the crusted-over deadfalls were that had been hollowed out years before by the fusion caterpillars and how a man could fall through the thin ice and break a leg even in the fractional gravity of this moon. A flock of scooters had sprung up in front of them and the boy had got two of the warped ones —

discolored things, ugly, that lurched away and scrambled over the others to get away — before the mutations got in amongst the rest.

“Bad sign. They already know enough to do that.”

“Why doesn’t Bio program the reg’lars to turn on the mutes?”

“Don’t want to give them highly developed survival traits. Be just that much harder to kill them off when we introduce the good lifeforms, the ones we want to make the stable ecology.”

“Ah well,” Manuel said, full of himself and with an elaborate casualness, “that just makes for more huntin’ and — ”

“Listen.”

Over their short-range came a sputtering, a low murmur, almost blending with the static of Jupiter’s auroral belts. Yet Manuel caught the fervid yips and cries of the pack, a chorus blurred but with a high running keening to it, each voice a distinct animal but each responding with its own fevered energy. He did not need to ask what drew cries from them. He reached down and thumbed on his gun, though he knew it was useless and a mere gesture. But it was important to make the gesture, just as it was to wait breathless and see in his mind’s eye what the yelps and grunts and chattering pursued: the thing that moved smokelike through the icefields, running with blind momentum, the shifting alabaster shape. Old Matt had taught him to tilt his gun high and wait, motionless, watching by using his peripheral vision, not moving his head. He stood and tried to sense an expectant tremor, a rumble, some twinkling of the light that would tell him, warn him. The animals were louder now but not stronger — their cries had risen too high and had taken on a tone of confusion and submission to the inevitable, not tired yet but flagging in some way the boy could not name but felt.

He touched his helmet to the man’s and whispered, not awakening the suit radio, “It’s coming?”

The blended murmur of the cries peaked without ever resolving into a clear voice, and the sound dissolved as the boy listened. Old Matt did not answer. He gradually turned his head so that Matt could see his face and he shook his head, no, with a look of quiet watchfulness. The animals were now a dull drone, defeated, fading. Old Matt smiled.

“It never noticed them. It didn’t even speed up this time.”

“It’s here, though! First sighting in, how long, nearly a year.”

“It’s looking for something?”

“Could be. Some mineral it needs to supply itself, regenerate itself, I don’t know. Doesn’t seem to need energy. Unless it’s got a fusion burner inside and filters isotopes out of the ice?”

“Yeah, and if it needs something around here — ”

“It doesn’t need anything that bad.” He surveyed the rough valley before them, inert and plain, and looked at Manuel. His worn ortho’d face held large, luminous eyes that moved liquidly. The replacement jaw and



cheek were shiny even in the dim sunlight, and his original skin was wrinkled like an old piece of crumpled paper. It was the eyes that seemed most alive in him, least weathered, by the long decades that face had endured, the century mark it had passed almost without noticing, the injuries and radiation and the sweat and ache of toil it had taken and survived.

"Truth is, it doesn't need anything. It's trapped here, far as I can tell. No boosters to take it off surface. Can't get into orbit. Must have been hurt a long time ago and now it has to move through the waters under us and across the ice like a man pacing a cell will do, wearing a path in the stone of the floor but not stopping. I'll bet it looks up at the stars and thinks and wants to go up there. But it can't. It's not complete or else it would. So it wanders. Not because there's anything it needs but because it wants to have a look. See who's new. See what kind of men there are out here this year and what they can do and if there's a servo'd animal or a machine we can put up against it this year that is any better than all the ones it outran or smashed or rolled over year after year before. It's curious maybe, or just keeping track." He shrugged. "But those are ways of talking about it that make sense to us, and one thing I'm sure of — it doesn't make sense. And it won't, ever." The animals were gone now and there was nothing on short-range radio. "They'll run on after it until it sees what they're worth. Then it'll burrow down, drive straight down seventy clicks or more if it wants to, directly into the slush and water that this ice is just the scum of — and that's it. Gone. Until it wants to come back."

When they reached the camp the animals were already there, huddled together as if to keep warm, bunched up against the wall of the shack. They had all come in an hour before, all except for Short Stuff. A gray rain came down and small puffball clouds swept overhead, blown from the warmer regions to the south where vast volumes of methane and ammonia were vaporizing beneath fusion caterpillars. Old Matt squatted beside the mound of animals and touched the yellow ceramic flank of one. They all stirred, scraping against each other, eyes rolling and flecked with blue, and a muttering came from them, growls and whimpers and a low persistent chittering that the boy could not place as coming from any particular animal. They trembled all the same way, Earthlife returned from meeting something it had not known. Two hours after supper, after the whiskey ration was already gone, Short Stuff came scuffling up to the lock entrance and scraped at it. It chattered weakly, forming words in no particular order, thick-tongued and droning: *hurt . . . fast . . . big . . . fire . . . break . . . hurt . . .* Manuel and Petrovich and Old Matt led it into the service shack and stripped the crushed manifold in its left side where something had brushed by, just a glancing and casual blow, not intended to kill or else Short Stuff would not be here.

"Look, see. It tore the flesh," Petrovich said. Blood oozed from beneath the crumpled steel.

"No bones broken," Old Matt said, feeling along the animal's ribs. The matted hair reeked with fear and sweat. Manuel saw that Short Stuff was a small ape, harnessed well into the transducers and servos that engulfed the lean form.

"Lucky to live," Petrovich remarked as he applied locals and patched up the raked flesh, stemming the seeping, wiping away the cakes of dried blood.

Old Matt murmured, "It just got too close."

Petrovich said, "I saw a fastfilm, once. It picked up animals, smashed them down. It will kill."

"Not this time. Not without reason."

The chimp kicked and howled softly, probably from pain, but perhaps also from the memory of running hard and fast at something it could not hope to catch.

Old Matt patted Short Stuff fondly. "He's seen it before. Knew it. Just like a chimp, smarter than most of the rest and thinking himself to be more like a man. When he saw it he didn't wait, or else he'd never got that close. He had to have thought about it a lot and known that one time or another he would have to run toward it and not away like the rest. To be like a man. Even though it was pointless and he would be paying a price." He rubbed and soothed the animal, talking to it softly. The boy helped him fashion a replacement of curved sheet steel and insulation for the rib section.

It was dark when they left the service shack. Jupiter was eclipsing the sun. The small bright orange ball slipped behind the cloud tops of ammonia cirrus and a rosy halo slowly crept around the squat, watermelon-banded planet. Near the poles the boy could see a violet auroral glow, hanging curtains of gauzy light where atoms were excited by downrushing streams of energetic electrons. Across the slowly churning face of the dark world, lightning forked yellow and amber, strokes thousands of kilometers long, bridging clouds of ammonia and water far larger than Ganymede itself. The men stopped and peered upward at the passing of noon in the seven-day-long alternation of sun and shadow that Ganymede kept. The halo shifted slowly, rimming the huge world in diffused, ethereal amber and pink. The view was better here than among the lights of the Settlement and the men paused, watching the slow certain sway of worlds as gravity gently tugged each on its smooth, unhurried path. Then the glow broke free of the planet's waist and became the fierce, burning dot of their sun, bringing a return of noon. They bent their heads back down then and began to think of other things, of rest before the hunting would begin again tomorrow, and scuffed their boots free of ice and dirt before going inside to the rank smell and buzzing

talk and pungent cycled air of men.

The boy did not see Old Matt leave the next morning, early, while the cooking was still going on and Manuel was cutting onions for the broth.

"*Madre*. That one goes off, says no word," Colonel Lopez said. His stern jaw clenched. "Thinks he is too old for rules."

Petrovich said, "Get himself dead alone. He falls into a gully, no one to seal his suit if it holes."

They hailed Old Matt on directional but he would not answer. He was making slow but steady progress toward the west, into the rock hills called Halberstam's.

"I could catch up to him," Manuel pointed out, though he suspected that Old Matt could slip away from him in the hills easily enough.

Colonel Lopez made a rough sound of exasperation. "Then we have two missing. No. He has done this before, I remember, on other hunting teams."

"He may lose function in that arm of his," Petrovich said. "Or the face. Could die before we get him back here for the medical."

"That is his choice," the Colonel said. He shrugged.

Later in the day the Colonel said to him, "You miss not going out with Old Matt, don't you?"

"*Sí*."

"You couldn't show better taste, son. He's the original."

"Then why don't you go after him?"

"I'll do just about anything to keep a man or woman alive out here. Only I won't smother them."

Manuel said nothing. He had seen the hard edge in his father before, but this was the first time he understood it.

The boy went out with the other teams for the next three days, each morning arising and hoping to find that the old man had returned in the night. Each day the pulsing orange dot of Old Matt's indicator showed him moving in a sweeping pattern of arcs, pausing often, probably to rest. Manuel teamed with Petrovich and then his father and showed the Colonel how he could shoot. They got some variant scooters and on the second day found a new variety of rockeater, one that had taken to drinking from the ammonia streams and not digesting the more difficult stones as it should. The Colonel checked with Bio and they killed the thing. The animals went with the Colonel so there was a lot of activity that Manuel was not used to on the hunt. The animals would scamper up the ridges and drive down scooters of all kinds, and the men would try to shoot the warped ones before they got away. The third day they nabbed a big bunch of them in a deadend valley and shot twenty-two mutated forms and three more of the warped rockeaters. Manuel helped gut them for Bio samples. He had gotten five of them himself, and only missed twice. He felt high-spirited on the hike back.

He came clumping into the cabin, hungry, and flopped down on his bunk before he saw that Old Matt was squatting in a corner, passive and remote and spooning soup into his half-metal mouth, grave and thoughtful. Manuel talked to him, asked questions; but the old man answered only in short sentences, or not at all. The men did not bother with him. After supper Manuel was invited into a card game and forgot to talk to Old Matt again, and then got tired and went to his bunk.

The next morning was dim. Ganymede's night was dominated by Jupiter, reflecting sunlight so that shadows were blurred and uncertain. The moon's shadow crawled across the orange and brown bands. Without any discussion Old Matt took him out again. The old man got a two-seater cycle rider and they went sputtering and muttering their way across glassy-rimmed craters and into the Halberstam hills. Manuel had never seen them before. They were new, thrust up by ice tectonics, the great plates shifting and butting against each other like living gravid glaciers driven by the churn of currents deep within the moon. In places crags and jagged peaks of ice split the rock; and then scarcely a kilometer away the battle turned and iron-grey shoulders of an ancient meteorite ruptured a slick sheet of ammonia ice, ripping through to build new heights. There had been no time here yet for the sway of the seasons to freeze and unfreeze liquids in the cracks and cleave rock from rock, popping slabs of it free and then grinding it, pulverizing it through the centuries, down into dust.

Here and there the heat released by the clash had melted ice and now thin rivers carved snakey lines in the rising valley floors. In time there would be cañons and boulders and grit beneath the boots of men. They left the cycle and went on foot into a narrow, snow-choked ravine where icicles dripped and ammonia fog rose in wreaths about them. In the heavy gloom of night Jupiter-light struck dull amber reflections from snowdrifts. Old Matt stopped, peered ahead. Then he gestured silently and the boy saw a channel dug through the ten-meter-deep snow, big as a crawler and bottoming out in black-streaked gray rock, scraped and ravaged and bearing on its scoured face the large delta-shaped print. No ruts led away from the deep channel and the boy could not see how the thing had come and gone and left no trace beyond this. The delta lay in the rock, mute, and he felt a trace of what he had heard in the murmur and cries of the animals as they met it, some of them too for the first time. He looked around the cramped white ravine and felt trapped. He turned uneasily, fighting the sudden leap of fear that there was something, some movement, just behind his back, where he could not see it in time.

"You found this?" he said unnecessarily, just to be saying something and not have the silence.

"No. I saw some ruts over in the next valley. Looked like they came this way. I was taking you there."

Manuel nodded. He felt an anticipation and also a thick dread, a scent in his nostrils like hot copper in the metalworking shops. The smell swarmed up through him and brought a sensation in his stomach and bowels, a tightening, as he saw for the first time the sign that this was a mortal thing, living and actual, not a mere form that lumbered through his dreams and moved in the stories the men told when they were half-drunk and could not be trusted to get it right — not a fragment of his world but bigger than it.

"You think it's still here?"

"Might. The scientists said it stays in a place for a while — searching, they think. I dunno. Maybe it comes to have a look at us, then it goes on."

"Tomorrow, we can all come. Maybe corner it."

He laughed. "Corner it? Might's well trap a man in a box of fog."

"We can try."

"Sure. We can try."

That night Petrovich fell into a political argument with Major Sanchez and the two men got loud, the whiskey doing most of the talking. The news had come through that Asteroid Conglomerate United wanted to push development of a petroleum-synthesizing capability on Ganymede, and the moon as a whole had to vote on the measure. Major Sanchez said it was trouble enough to grow the food for the Goddamn 'roids and what did Ganymede get out of the trade anyway except doodads nobody wanted except the townies and they weren't the ones who'd have to bust their butts building a Goddamn petro plant. Petrovich thought that was stupid and not forward-looking, or did the Major want to forever be buying petro from Luna or even God-help-us from Earth itself, paying percentage on percentage for every middleman between here and Brazil? What-the-hell, Major Sanchez bellowed, there wasn't a liter of petro in the Settlement that hadn't been squeezed out of seeds or stems, it was sure enough all right for their purposes, and if the 'roids wanted higher quality stuff they could buy it. What'd they need it for anyway, when the used servo'd animals for their work mostly, and animals didn't need lubricants like machines anyway, that was the reason for developing good servo animals in the first place, to save on lubricants out here, as any damn fool knew if he studied any history instead of pigging it up with the smearlop every night to scramble his brains every minute he was off work, right? Petrovich opened his mouth to shout back but his eyes were glazed and he had trouble thinking as fast as Sanchez because of the smearlop, and at that moment Colonel Lopez stepped in and broke it up, telling them both to get to bed. Petrovich sat on his bunk and shook his head for a while, muttering, knowing he should sleep but not wanting to seem to be following the orders from the Colonel, and then he saw Manuel and asked in a slurred, gravel voice, "You thinking you hit it tomorrow." When the

boy did not answer Petrovich prompted him with, "Eh?"

"No point."

"Sure is point. Learn to shoot. Maybe get lucky, hurt it."

"Don' know what to aim at."

"Nobody does. It is round, like an egg. Nothing to fix eye on."

"No it isn't!" Major Sanchez sprang up. "*Mierda!* It is blocks, three blocks stuck together. The legs they come down from the corners, each block with four — no, not at the middle, so there are eight legs."

"Is round," Petrovich said. "I saw it three, four times. Round and rolling."

"There are pictures! We get back to Sidon, I show you fastframe, they —"

"It crawls, blind man. And on its belly, not on legs," a voice drawled from the bunks far back. "I seen it drag itself up a sheer cliff using grapplers, just five years back."

The Colonel stood up and waved the voice into silence. "There are many forms. You forget that the cameras showed different results from time to time."

"Each time I see it," Petrovich grumbled, "is the same."

Major Sanchez said slyly, "Perhaps the good machine is simply trying to make things simple for you, my friend."

Petrovich grunted in dismissal and rolled onto his bunk. Low talk continued among the bare pipe frames of the bunks, muted now, desultory, amid the stale, sour fumes left from supper. Old Matt had come into this part of the rambling shack to get closer to the burbling heaters, and he sat down beside Manuel. "They argue over nothing."

"Seems to me it's important to know what to look for," Manuel said.

"It changes. Not to confuse us. For itself."

"Should be some vulnerable spot, you'd think."

Old Matt shrugged, his face wrinkling into a fine-threaded map as he chewed on a hemp slug. "There are holes sometimes. A mouth or an ass or nothing we have a name for. It doesn't matter."

"There's got to be something we can do. Those scientists —"

"They are hunters of a different kind. They never knew."

"With e-beams and all those traps — I looked at some of them when I was in Loki Patera — they sure gave it a try."

"They never hemmed it in enough. Tomorrow, if it comes up on us sudden and we box it in — well, sometimes in the past it's not taken the time to burrow down through the ice and get away. Don't know why. So it might go right through us, fast as a bat out of hell. That's when you got to watch."

"What . . . you mean me in particular?"

"Right."

"It would pick me out?"

"Might."

"You mean, I never been here before, an' it knows me anyway?"

"I don't know. But there've been times before, people who were new and it . . . look, maybe it remembers everything, never forgets a man or a crawler or an animal or anything. So somebody new comes along, it gets interested."

"Why?"

"It's been here a long time. Millions of years, they say, from the dating the stuff on the outer moons. Maybe it's bored."

It seemed to the boy that boredom or any other simple pathetic human emotion was not the way to think about the huge shape, and that its indifference to them meant it shared none of their values or illusions. Old Matt would say no more about it. He just shook his head and told Manuel to get into this bunk early; to rest; and the next day would be soon enough to see.

The land was vast and empty beneath the storm that had moved in from the south again, bringing a slow drizzle of methane-cloaked and ammonia-steeped droplets, all swirling in the still-thin mongrel chemlab gas that was the new air. Hovering just above the ice point, the sluggish vapor rolled in — ruddy banks of fog that clung to the sheets of ice as if the wispy stuff longed to return to the original and stable existence it had known for billions of years, to sink down and freeze and rest, and not be tortured by the harsh warmth that men had brought to boil the elements into a blanket of gas, to cloak the old dead world now resurrected. There were thirty-nine men and women on the hunt that day, three having already gone back to Sidon to help with some hydro processing. (Or so they said. Petrovich and some others muttered over the steaming plates of breakfast that the three were jumpy when they heard about the Aleph, and had discovered the rush job to be done at Sidon awful fast when they'd called home the night before. The Colonel told them to shut up talking about men behind their backs, and sent the two loudest out to flame the night's ice off the crawler treads, a job nobody liked.)

The thirty-nine included some elders, though none that dated as far back as Old Matt, and some men out for a holiday who had never really hunted a lot and knew little more than the boy even now. Still, as they dismounted from the carriers at the foothills of the Halberstams, there was less of the hooting and high spirits and aimless moving about, less arguing over who would carry what and what routes to take into the craggy wastes that loomed above them all. Storm clouds swept the harsh faces of rock and stole warmth from their suits, making a temperature differential across a suit big enough to stress the multiple-ply insulators, so that their seams popped and creaked. They marched. The crawlers and walkers fell behind, waiting at the edge of the glassy, pitted plain as the men climbed up the rugged hills and split into parties that fanned through the skinny valleys and arroyos. Manuel went with old Matt, the



Colonel and nine others, the men tramping stolidly up the veiled valleys, watching for ruts in the snow or scrapings on the outcroppings of ice. They had six animals with them, frisking at the head and tail of the column, pouring forth more energy than the men in their spirited dashes and leaps and continual tangled games of chase and tag. Old Matt struggled to keep up. He puffed along, head up to the sky, face contracted with effort, listening to the light babble of the animals over shortrange and the occasional muffled words of the men, and yet the boy could see that Old Matt was not paying attention to the words and yelps but instead was concentrating on something else, turning his head this way and that so that its steel and copper caught the dulled light. Above, stars were hazy jewels lingering above thin cirrus.

Colonel Lopez tracked each party on his faceplate display, ordering them to drop a man into each promising branch valley as they came to it. The hail stopped and then the pall of rain fell below them. The teams made good time despite the deepening blue-green snow as they worked their way higher. In the light gravity they loped easily, hitting the ground in three-second-long strides, their boots clutching the ice or snow as they landed to insure a purchase. Where an iceslide or crevasse blocked them and they could not leap it by themselves, they powered-up their lower servos and, with some effort, made the jump with augmented muscles. The boy panted at the hard places and could not hear over shortrange whether the others did too, but he was determined that they would not have to slow for him. The Colonel set the pace and kept a watchful eye on Old Matt, and the boy saw that his father was restraining the younger men so that they would not get straggled out and the old man would not push himself to keep up. His father was like that, gruff and hard and yet forgiving when you were up against your limits.

They surprised some scooters, slurping away with idiot persistence at the ammonia streams. The men picked off the deformed ones, everybody firing fast before they were all gone. There was not much life this high, and pretty soon they saw nothing but rockjaws munching stoically at pebbles and, higher still, crawlies searching out methane-rich ponds, their carcasses puffy and distended with the storage sacs where they would process the carbon-rich residues into better compounds when they hibernated.

The men dropped off singly at each branching of the valley, taking an animal with them, until there were four left. The Colonel waved Manuel forward as they came to a place where the valley wall split as though a huge hand had pried apart a stone wedge. Up that divide a shallow ravine worked back among some jagged peaks.

"Satellite time-step map shows that one is pretty clear of slide debris now," the Colonel said. "Lot of rain here last few weeks. Washing it away."

Old Matt caught up to them. "Where's the pressure ridge around here?"

Colonel Lopez glanced to his left where his helmet flashed the needed plot in contour lines of green and crimson. "Runs down from that crag."

"Think there'll be any slippage?" the old man asked.

"Fracture fault lines fan out to the north. Don't look like any on this side."

"Satellites can't see everything."

"Sí. You go with Manuel, eh? Up that cañon. Keep him from blowing his leg off and bringing down a slide on himself."

"Sure."

The two took Slicky with them and headed up the ravine. A small stream tinkled and chimed, echoing from the ice-crusted walls. Rosy ammonia vapor steamed from it. The boy sloughed along, thinking of the crushed steel plate of Short Stuff and of the high keening cries the animals had made before. Melting snow and ice fed the stream and squished under his boots. The man spoke to Slicky and let it romp a bit and then spoke again and it stopped moving and quivering so much, and fell into step at their heels, the yellow ceramic sliding and clicking now and then as it leaped over a streamlet but otherwise without noise, patient and eager both. Blocks of shagged-off rock had tumbled into the ravine, and now as they went on slabs of ice covered the floor, shortening the ravine until it was a trough. Old Matt kept studying the steep snowdrifts and rock walls. He paused, puffing, and said, "Quiet from now on."

"You think . . . ?"

"There will be nothing, not even rockjaws, this high. Anything that moves means something, here."

The boy nodded. He stamped his feet to warm them. Old Matt popped a vent in his own suit and said, "Take care of this now."

Urine jetted out and splattered on rock. Manuel did the same. He thought it was to save distraction later, but in the stillness of the cañon the crackling and sputtering of the urine as it froze boomed in his ears, and he saw it was to avoid noise at the wrong time.

He asked, "What about suit sound?"

"Nothing for it. Reverse osmosis is as quiet as you can get. Only thing we could do would be turn off the warmer, and this high your lungs would freeze solid in half an hour."

Manuel nodded. They went on, walking now rather than loping, to keep down the clatter of rocks beneath their boots. Every few minutes his suit would exhale excess carbon dioxide it could not handle, and the gas puff would snap loudly as it froze and fell to the ground. Otherwise a strange silence descended over the boy and he heard only his own breathing. His external micromikes did not pick up even a murmur of a breeze; the atmosphere was too thin here to carry enough. He toted on his



back a new gun, given him by his father this morning: a double-bore fan laser, used for engineering back at Sidon. He had fired it only once, at a boulder to learn the recoil and that it pulled to the left a little, as the Colonel had said.

They went two clicks, until the ravine gave out at a tilted sheet of ice, studded with red-gray rock. Old Matt said, "No point going more. Here's where we separate."

"How come? Won't we be safer if we stick —"

"There's no safe or not safe to this. It'll run down two just as easy as one. You go over near that gorge, where the ice turns purple. Keep your back to the gorge. Not likely it'd come at you from that way. It'd have to come out of the gorge itself and why should it go to that trouble when there's softer stuff up here."

"All right." The boy hefted the double-bore.

"I'll be a few hundred meters upslope. That way we get two angles on it, probably."

"And if one of us gets hurt, the other likely won't."

"Yeah." The old man peered at him, blinked with the copper eye, and smiled. "Turn off the shortrange, too. Sometimes the Aleph, it gives off a lot of electromagnetic stuff. Just noise, the scientists said. I dunno. It'll overload your set, though."

"Okay."

"And stay still."

"And Slicky?"

"He's a porpoise. Wrong instincts for this, never mind what they say about IQ-boosting making them the same."

"He can distract it."

"I kind of think that's what we're all doing, distracting it. At best. All right —" He bent down and told Slicky to take a position downslope of the two of them.

Manuel liked the first hour. It gave him rest and he became used to the utter silence. An occasional faint *ping* came as a grain of dust, falling in from some askew orbit around Jupiter, struck his suit, making it ring. The unending hail of high energy protons could not reach him, though, through the tight-wound magnetic fields that blanketed his suit, the superconducting coils with their eternal currents brushing aside the deadly sleet. Old Matt had taught him how moving would in turn make magnetic ripples in the iron-rich rock nearby, faint surges that the Aleph could pick up, and so he stood absolutely still. Ganymede was swinging more into the sun now; and as he waited the dawn came on with infinitesimal slowness, gradually brightening the blue drifts of snow and pushing back the shadows. Above, the dark sky absorbed everything and would not yield. This high, the atmosphere that man and his machines labored to bring had no effect; and the land was as it had been for billions of years, inert and cold beyond any human sensing, yet with slow

inevitable forces of its own that thrust up mountains and tortured the ice. It was in the third hour now; and he was becoming tired, even though he had his knee servos on lock and was not carrying his weight at all. The boy felt as if he could sense the potential in the bulging rock beneath him, and the gathering strength it brought to even this high a place. Only slowly did it come to him that the tremor and silent pressure was not from his thinking but was real, steady. He blinked and the rock was rising, shifting. Old Matt was a distant figure that had long ago blended into the terrain but now was waving, pointing at the bulge that grew in the ice sheet; and Slicky moved nervously, one foot-forward and another back as the first crack came, a jagged line drawn quickly across the purple ice, widening even as it spread, snow tumbling in and then a second crack and a third, as fast as he could see. Rock groaned under him and he brought up the double-bore but there was nothing to aim for. The land had risen a full meter now. Pebbles and then boulders began to roll, slowly and then faster and then crashing down, smacking the ice and keeping on, some falling into the spreading web of cracks that split and popped and split again, boulders now tumbling into the fissures and wedging there. The growing yawning blackness echoed the emptiness of the dark sky. Manuel turned, holding the useless gun. He leaped out of the way as the rock split under him with a deep bass snapping sound. Old Matt was struggling down the slope, trying to keep his balance. The boy yearned for a target, something to act against. Slicky yelped and chippered and began to run, away from the growing bulge that centered on the triangle made by the three of them. Manuel stepped cautiously forward, toward the bulge. The land groaned and heaved, nearly throwing Manuel from his feet. He smelled the hot, coppery scent. Fresh gaps raked across the ice sheet and he leaped to avoid one. Slicky ran, its back to them, and did not see the crack coming. Blackness rushed under the slipping, frantic form and in one instant had consumed it, swallowing the steel and ceramic as though it were nothing and then moving on, the cracks stretching down the shallow ravine like ever-lengthening arms. And then — stopped. The grinding hollow noise that the boy had not separated from the other sounds now abruptly faded and the ice ceased its motion, pausing; and with arching slowness then began to settle, subside, stones crashing again as it tilted, gaps narrowing, the bulge sinking back.

In a few moments it was gone. The boy stood with his gun high and ready and waited, breathless, but there was nothing more. The fissures did not close up fully. He was still wary, studying the ground near him, when Old Matt picked his way to him and touched helmets.

"No shortrange, not yet," the man said.

"What . . . It, it never showed itself . . . just . . ."

"Sometimes it's that way. It came to have a look."

"But it never came out, never . . ."

"Doesn't need to, I guess. It could tell we were up here and it let us know we had been looked at."

"Slicky."

"It got a morsel. I don't think it came for that. Could be that's what made it break off, even." The old man shook his head. "No, that's probably wrong. The worst thing is to start thinking about it the way we think about everything else. The worst."

"Slicky was trying to get away."

"Right."

They went back down the ravine in silence, the boy's mind aswarm with mingled thoughts and emotions and confusions of the two. Next time he would act differently, do something, find a way — but he could not think of anything he could have done otherwise, and the flat hardness of that fact itself made him feel better. Whether he did anything different, at least he was sure there would be a next time. It might come tomorrow or sometime beyond but it would come; and in thinking of it he discovered something that absolved him of his fear, for there was no guilt in fearing what was beyond you and that ran, blind and remorseless down through the years, shrugging off the mortal weight that a human had to carry. He tasted the coppery scent in his nostrils and knew it and was no longer afraid of that itself.

The reports came in from the other men and animals, plenty of scooters potted at and a rumble felt here and there; but nothing sighted, nothing engaged. He felt good about that, too. It was arrogant to think he had been singled out; but he had been lucky, the dumb luck of the beginner. From now on he would not depend on luck. Someday he would see the thing, of that he was now sure. If it could be done by keeping on, then he would see it. Perhaps tomorrow and perhaps next week. As it turned out, it was more than a year.

**B**uilding the Biosphere was a longterm task, almost an act of devotion performed for the generations to come, and so it had an ebb and surge ruled by the abrupt necessities of the present. The asteroid economy was expanding and demanded ever-greater supplies of water, food, nitrogen, carbon. The asteroids were rich in metals, but had few of the carbonaceous-chondrite chunks that could make the simple compounds for life. Ganymede supplied those and food, ferried in huge robot freighters on minimum-energy orbits. The Settlements melted ice, separated it into useable fluids, and grew food, all in exchange for industrial goods from the asteroids and beyond. They also supported the labs and outposts around Jupiter and Saturn. So the work was always piling up, there were rush allotments and long hours, and Manuel was of an age now that meant he had to put in a full man's hours even though he didn't have the strength of a grown man. He learned pipe-fitting and thermonuclear-hydro plumbing and worked just behind the construction

gangs as they raised the new vapor domes. There was little time for potting at scooters, especially since the things were learning to avoid humans and were seldom seen now near the Settlements. The constant proton sleet made the mutation rate high; the rockeaters started showing big inflamed warts and some began to prey on the jackrabs, finding some chemical addiction to the stringy jackrab flesh, and in turn working mischief with the delicately balanced and still experimental biosphere. Over a year after his first itme, the boy got to go out again on a pruning operation.

Petrovich and Major Sanchez led two separate parties and they spent a good fraction of their time sitting at a makeshift metal table and playing cards and arguing over which territory to hunt the next day. Manuel realized that it was their arguing, a kind of comfortable trading of insults and time-worn political cliches, that bound them together, and that despite the occasional flareups they were good friends. The Colonel just smiled when their sudden arguments flared up. Petrovich had started to develop a pot belly, the kind of protrusion that on a strongly muscled man almost seems to be another source of strength, bulging down and resting on his belt. Major Sanchez made this a point of fun and the two men spent themselves trying to outmarch or outshoot the other. They made a pair of hand pistols using plumber's lasers and on the hunt would go off together to find scooters or rockjaw-mutes and then would pot away at them, betting on the score.

Manuel was glad this kept them occupied because he wanted little to do with the parties who went after the rockjaws. He had his own ends in mind and the parties made too much noise, were rowdy with the freedom of living under the empty black sky and not having to work, and only got a goodly number of rockjaws because the dumb things could hardly hear and ran only if they picked up the metallic slap and scraping of boots on rock. He told the Colonel and Petrovich that he would rather go after the scooters. There were far fewer of them this year. Fatal mutations had killed many, as Bio had predicted; and there was less ammonia in the runoff now. The theory behind Bio's plan was that the atmosphere and icefields would change more rapidly than the scooters and crawlies and rockjaws and the rest could adapt. They were temporary, self-liquidating species, designed for transitional jobs. The changing atmosphere and the greenhouse-induced rise in temperature would eliminate them before they became a problem. The final stage, when the atmosphere changed over to oxygen-carrying, would wipe the entire bioslate clean, leaving room for new species, quasiEarthlike but able to tolerate the low temperatures. Then the entire moon would be farmed, with engineered fauna capable of withstanding high radiation and other threats.

The boy left each morning right after breakfast, shouldering the single-



bore laser his father had given him. He would own it all his life and fire it nearly every year (with only one major six-year interruption), because the biosphere always needed pruning, and would replace the stock twice (once because he dropped it to save himself on a ledge of a crevasse) and the lasing tube five times, each time with a higher power bolt-generating mechanism. For now the gun felt heavy and awkward in his hands; but he knew he would have to master it to have any appreciable firepower at all, though in truth he did not expect that for his ends mere power would make any difference. What he needed now was knowledge. He set out the first day with a cycle rider and went into the Halberstam Hills. He had not told them he would go that far because he knew his father would not let him, not without more experience. He shot two ugly, mutated scooters that morning. The slowly rising temperatures had scalped the hills of their snow, leaving iron-grey massifs to poke at the banded crescent of Jupiter. He hiked into the hills, loping in long easeful strides, landing smoothly and navigating by the satellite-guide program he had bought for his suit. It took him three hours to find the narrow ravine where he and Old Matt had found the deep gouge in the snow. The ravine was hard to identify now because nearly all the snow and even some of the ice had been drained off by a stream that clattered with stones and had already cut a deep gorge. The rock here was mostly nickel-iron from some ancient meteorite, and it colored the stream a lurid rust. Slides now clogged the ravine. He walked through it three times before he found a slab of rock that looked somehow familiar. Near the base of it he saw the delta-print pressed deeply in, mute and indomitable, a testament to what was a mere passing moment in the movements of the Aleph but which would be here, sunken in hard rock and testifying, he knew, when he was bones and ashes.

On the second day he ranged in the region south of the hills, among the flow plains of purple-orange ice. He was learning the land without knowing quite how, simply by immersing himself in it and getting the feel of the vast flat plains, the hummocked and water-carved terrain, the stress-torn troughs and gorges and cañons where the melting of snow and ice had shifted weight and brought disruption. In one hollow where the thin winds twisted in a perpetual breeze, he found thin sculptures of blue-black ice, taller than a man, wind-carved, spindly, glinting in the wan sunlight.

He came in late that day. His father studied him as he clumped in from the lock, tired and chilled, stamping off the ice from his boots. The shack insulation was poor and the temperature gradient was steep; standing up, you could wipe sweat from your face while your feet went numb. Colonel Lopez got his son a plate of the thick turkey stew with chunks of baked corn in it. Manuel went through the first plate without talking much, just

eating with that intensity the young have when the body asserts its demands. He finished and clumped stolidly into the steamy kitchen and came back with a second. He was a few mouthfuls in, going slower now, hunkered down and head bowed over the table, when the Colonel said mildly, "If you're going to look for it you should have some equipment."

Manuel's head jerked up. "How'd you . . . ?"

"I know it is hard to credit, but I was a boy once."

"Well . . . what'd you mean?"

"The thing's got metal in it. The research reports from back thirty, forty years ago say it's most likely iron and copper. Ferromagnetic, anyway."

"Looks like rock."

"Sometimes, *sí*. Others, not." The Colonel's eyebrows rose as he stared off into space, as if remembering. "No matter. Any big piece of iron moving, an antenna can detect it. Fast Fourier components in the magnetic field."

Manuel nodded. He knew "Fourier" meant some kind of frequency analysis. That could pick up when the Aleph was moving. "They ever track it that way?"

"Sure. Two centuries ago, Ganymede was smooth. We been melting and gouging, making terrain. Thing is, the scientific types spent a lot of ridgelines and mountains were exposed by the melting. There —"

"Really? That old?"

"Sure. Two centuries ago, Granymede was smooth. We been melting and gouging, making terrain. Thing is, the scientific types spent a lot of effort plotting where the Aleph went — figured it had a place to hide out maybe, down in the core or something."

"What for?"

"Repair itself. Rest up, maybe. Any —"

"Ha! *Que gente estúpido!* It doesn't need —"

"I'll thank you not to interrupt your father again," the Colonel said precisely, each word carrying its own weight. He paused and between the two flashed a challenge, a hint of the tension that was coming into their talk more as the years advanced, but that neither wanted to acknowledge. The boy twisted his mouth and looked away.

"To continue. I studied their maps. The Aleph goes everywhere, lingers seldom. The trajectory, it filled the moon's volume like spaghetti in a bowl, all through. Up to the crust, down to the core, swimming sometimes and running others. No sense to it."

Manuel's expression tightened. "No help in knowing that."

"My point is the method, not the results. They followed its movements with satellite triangulation. Detecting the ripples of magnetic fields as it passed."

"I don't know as I want to track it."

"No, but I want you to know when it's around."

"How?" Manuel went back to chewing, more pensively now, thinking.

"Carry some loop antennas with you."

"Weigh much?"

"Five kilos, maybe."

"How'll an antenna tell the difference between me, walking, and anything else?"

His father nodded with grudging respect for the boy's technical sense. "You have to stand still and take a reading. Squirt it up to satellite, they'll process it."

"Uh huh." He went to get more coffee. When he came back his father had unpacked a locker from the equipment room and was laying out some rifle antennas on a mess table.

"You had this all ready."

"Certainly. Brought it out from Sidon."

"I'm that easy to read, huh?"

"At times."

"Goddamn, I can't do a single thing without —"

"Son, you talked of little else these months. I do not want you to think you must sneak off and do it. And your mother, she is very concerned." He patted Manuel on the shoulder gingerly, defusing the tension between them with the gesture, reminding them both of the short time ago when they had wrestled on the living room carpet, when physical contact between them had none of the edge it carried now. He smiled, his lush black moustache catching the light. "Every boy knows he is immortal; but his parents, they are not so sure."

Manuel nodded. His irritation at sharing this dissipated. He listened carefully to the description of how the directional antennas worked, how you had to keep the impedance matched when you took them from the warm cabin into the cold of the plains, how the induction coils could freeze up on you if you kept them on the shaded side of your body for a while. Petrovich volunteered some advice and some other men picked up the antennas idly, as if remembering something they had felt and done long ago, and then put them back down and returned to their card games or simply to drinking their throat-searing ration around the heater, staring at the blue-white filaments that glowed like the center of a star.

He went out with the gear the next day, and the next. He ranged to the south, where he surprised a flock of mutant crawlies and got most of them before they could scatter. The antennas worked all right and satellite relay gave him two-second response. But he detected nothing moving under the wrinkled hills. He was learning the small tricks and lore of stalking, absorbing it without thinking. He could tell now at a great distance if a small, skittering form was a mutant, or if a blur of tracks made by passing

rockjaws was an hour old or a week, or whether something was hiding in the lee of a rock outcropping, where the ruddy snow gathered. His suit made little noise and so he became used to the eternal silence of the moon's rawness, marred only by the thin whisper of winds that were slowly claiming the land. A week passed. He returned to camp later and later, knowing the men were watching him with a certain nostalgic affection, seeing him shuffle in each time with a report of how many scooters or crawlies sighted, how many slain, all for the Bio update, though knowing that the central fact would go unmentioned because there was nothing to say about failure. Decades of research had shown that the Aleph might come to a hunting zone because of the increased activity, but it was a weak correlation and many doubted it. The boy might go the rest of his life without the luck turning. One late afternoon he came in early for the first time, toting the antennas listlessly, and passed by a walker where Old Matt was replacing a blowoff valve. Manuel waved to him silently and had turned away when the man said quietly, "I don't think that's the way."

Manuel whirled, something unleashed inside him, and said, "How come? Just the looking can't change what it does."

"Maybe so. I'm not sure."

"Well, my father says he picked it up three times this way, when he was trying. Three times."

"And saw it, too."

"So, Manuel said, his conclusion stolen.

"Those antennas, they've got resonant frequencies themselves, you know. Something wants to find out if they're around, it can send out a little signal. If your circuit starts to ring, that's a giveaway."

"Why'd it do that?"

"Why isn't the right question. No point in asking that. Maybe it got used to those scientists poking at it with those antennas and beams and so on. Got tired of it, even. So it's not interested in that."

"You don't know that."

The man's lips formed a wry expression Manuel could not read, with some amusement in it and a certain strange sadness too. "You're dead right. I sure don't."

Old Matt said nothing more and the boy stood there awkwardly, not wanting to go on inside. The man did not go back to the valve job either, so the two of them just waited, the boy staring down at his boots and tucking his hands into his pouchpockets. When he saw Old Matt was not going to say anything no matter how long the silence went on he looked up and murmured, "You think maybe it's watching anyway."

"Could be."

"I don't . . . don't know. . ."

The man said firmly, "I don't want to tell a boy to go against his

father's advice. You know that."

"Sure."

"And you're right. Nobody's sure of anything in this and never will be." He leaned against the big legs of the walker, bracing his bootheels on the waffled stepping pads slick with ice. Ganyমেদে was coming out of its long murky night; and the camp — the big rambling shack, the walkers and cycles and crawlers parked everywhichway, the discarded manifolds and cowlings from repairs, the stunted prickly antenna tower, all collected here in a clump against the spreading cold wilderness that stretched to all horizons — seemed flat and insubstantial in the twilight, unreal. *Resonant frequencies. Ringing circuit coils*, the boy thought.

The man pursed his lips, metal shining. "Your choice, m'boy."

"Guess so." He squinted at the old man, who seemed now to seep into the dusky seamless wilderness and smile fondly out from it, leaving for the boy the next step.

He was one of the first ones out the next morning, loping into a light, misty dawn as the sun broke over the far range of hills, stretching blue shadows on the mathematically flat plain below the cabin. He went twenty kilometers without needing to consult his faceplate map to find a way through the rutted valleys and fresh gorges of the continually working land. He left the antennas in a hollow, a dark depression on the otherwise unblemished blue-white mesa. He felt freer as he loped steadily along, coasting on his long parabolic arcs which gave him a good view of the terrain ahead, making better time without the long rifle antennas. He moved with graceful speed but quietly, landing solidly well free of rocks that could turn beneath him and start a clattering slide. He surprised flocks of scooters and bunches of the stolid rockjaws, picking out the mutes as he skimmed over their confused flight, aiming and firing by well-learned habit now, almost casually. He had worried once, back at Sidon, about the ethical matter of killing, especially considering how many people had strong views on vegetarianism (including his mother, who sniffed and obviously withheld comment whenever he ate real meat). He had finally settled his mind when he realized that these beings were inventions pure and simple, not things brought out of the matrix of a world on equal terms with man, with equal ancient origins, but made fresh and sometimes badly in a test tube, engineering miracles on a par with walkers or shuttleships, running well for a while and then breaking down, for that was the way the boy thought of mutation.

His leaving of the antennas was an act of surrender to the emptiness of this world and what it had to yield of itself. He went forward, carrying his fear — for his father was wrong, and his mother; he now felt fear as a presence which should be endured, and in that had left behind the essential state of boyhood. Yet he was without real hope.

He went that way for three days. Each was the same, and he fell into a kind of rhythm of searching, potting at the mutes when he saw them but not now seeking them out with craft. By noon of the third day he was farther from the camp than he had ever been. He had taken a cycle for the first fifty clicks both because the area was pretty well picked clean of mutes and because he wanted to get free of the chance encounters with other parties. He knew there was no place more likely for the Aleph to turn up than any other, but he felt that fresh terrain was better, somehow. He had already relinquished what he could, and now it was a matter of patience, the running out of the odds. He loped steadily through cañons and river valleys, over low mesas studded with boulders, across kilometer-wide sheets of ice as markless and fresh as if made yesterday. The rhythm of his running absorbed him; and he gave himself over to an endless course of ice and snow and rock, all flooding beneath him as he soared and landed, perpetually in an onward-pressing tilt. He stopped only when a comfortable fatigue came into his legs. He found himself in a gorge that played out into an alluvial fan of pebbles and ice chunks, newly swept down from a jagged ridgeline. He recognized nothing around him that corresponded to the faceplate map. He took a leap as high as he dared, but saw no prominent landmarks that would help. It was a matter of pride that he should learn the land, because satellite systems could not always be doing location fixes for each person on the surface. Old Matt had taught him that, and had talked about the days when men first moved on Ganymede and you could wait an hour for a directional fix from the overloaded systems. He started to backtrack, then, to learn this new territory, pay more attention, not let himself get caught up in the endless hypnotic rhythm of the open vastness and his progress through it. Yet in that lay his own transition, for it was in the slow backward trek that he sensed something he could not name and which caused him to slow his pace, to pause in his loping and look out over the yawning vistas of plain and ridgeline. At one outthrust arm of rock he stopped, panting, blinking back sweat. He vented his urine sac, the thin yellow stream sputtering and foaming green as it struck a slab of ammonia ice. He looked down, muzzy-minded, and saw a few meters away in faceless rock the sunken delta print. He did not move. He looked up, slowly and without hope, and saw ten meters beyond another delta impressed upon the pitted iron-gray stone. Looking beyond he saw the next one and with it a rut carved deeply, slicing down a meter into the rock and scooping out a boulder-sized volume. He went forward, counting — three, four, two together, another — and each had a burnished brown scar around it, as if cut by flame only a moment before, the marks seeming to come out of nothing as he trotted after them, panting, pulled forward, gasping almost as though his suit yielded no more air, up a fan of slide ice and onto a slope — where he slipped in gravel and almost lost the trail. He struggled up and onto a

ledge, then over that into a clear spot of barren rock and purple ice, rushing now, breathless and aware of the utter silence around him, his isolation, a black infinity above and no shelter anywhere; and that was when he saw it.

The thing came out of a sheer cliff of stone. It was alabaster in parts and in others oozing an amber, watery light that refracted through his helmet. The ground trembled and the cliff face fractured into thousands of facets as the thing worked its way out, turning by some unimaginable means and groaning, working against the rock that did not confine it but only supported. Splinters of light broke from it and a harsh rasping rattled up through his boots. It was big, how big he could not say because here perspective was lost and he could not pull his eyes away to compare it with anything as shards broke from the cliff and rained down before him, sharp flakes glinting as they turned in the yellow sunlight. It moved up the vertical face and outward at the same time, not struggling but coming steadily, without haste, now suspended above the declivity by means he could not see, its form still hard to make out because it reflected the new biting sun into his eyes and carried in its bulk a restless blue glow that fogged the air nearby. It stopped. He had the distinct feeling that it was looking at him, had meant to study him in just this way. This lasted only an instant. Then, so quickly that his eyes overshot and he could not be sure how it happened the Aleph was gone. A blue steam churned the air, crackling with phosphorescent orange flakes. He thought it turned and reentered the pitted rock, but a moment later when he tried to recall the act, it seemed that perhaps it simply faded into the grey mute face, gliding backwards into parting rock, with a final crack and groan of weight released. The damaged cliff remained, its oval wound like a screaming mouth. Stirring trembled up through his boots. He began to breathe again. Only after a long moment in the absolute silence did the boy realize that he had not even raised his gun to it.

They returned to Sidon Settlement four days later. The boy was glad of it. He needed time to think and feel his way through that momentary but powerful contact, coming the way he had always known it would, with him alone and confronting the thing without moving, riveted in that single arcing instant when it revealed itself, as it had shown itself before to countless men and then gone on, unconcerned, oblivious to the puny attempts to even momentarily deflect it from its unknown course. Manuel needed time and his father understood that, just as he understood why his son had discarded the antennas. Manuel had forgotten that his calls for interpretation to the satellite system would be billed to his family's account. The Colonel saw the falloff in use and knew, without mentioning it, why it was necessary to the boy. This was a time to ease up, let go, in the rearing of a boy; and from now on the loosening would be more important than the constraints. "Don't let it go to your head," he



told Manuel one evening over supper, after his wife had gone to her work shift. "That thing doesn't care about you. It won't reward you when you take risks. It is simply indifferent. That's the fact about it that most never learn. They hate it and fear it and finally ignore it. Because of that. It would be easier if it hated us. Maybe even if it hunted us. But it doesn't care. Remember."

Manuel knew his father was right but that did not change how he thought about the hunt, or about the huge chunky shape that still swam and towered, absolute and luminous, in his dreams. The form would return to him in sleep every few weeks. He would waken early, sweaty sheets twisted about him in his narrow bunk, the ventilator whirring patiently, and drift up from muddy lands where the shape always waited, knowing he would come again. Lying there, halfway into the world, he could not fix the form of it in his memory. He relived the momentary brush, and at the center of it was a blank, a space filled with color and sound but no residual image. He knew now the reason Petrovich and Major Sanchez and the others quarreled over this, for he, too, had only an impression, a faint memory of darker places in the sides and a muscular, ponderous weight. This puzzled him and he finally went to Old Matt to ask about it.

The old man lived in back of a machine shop on Tunnel D, in an old storage room he had claimed because nobody wanted it. He did odd jobs around the Settlement now, light manual labor, and when his ortho'd arm kicked up he made up his labor increment by contracting himself out, or putting in time at computer inventory.

The room was cluttered and dim, packed with equipment older than anything Manuel had ever seen. He wondered if any of it worked. Old Matt sat Manuel on a creaking cot and poured cups of strong tea. "It looked long, kind of tube-shaped to me, all the times I saw it."

"Petrovich said it was like an egg."

"Petrovich says lots of things."

"Some of the men, Flores and Ramada, say they saw it like a tortilla, flat and saucer-shaped."

"They had been at the smearlop; I remember that time. Lucky they didn't blow off a leg, the way they were."

"The scientists, their pictures, they show it in chunks. But long, as you said."

"They would know more than I. They had the cameras."

"Where there any mouths or ears on it?"

"Why? What does it matter?"

"We should know as much as we can," Manuel said indignantly, his voice rising.

"Pointless knowledge, unless there is a way to use it." The man slurped at his tea and smacked his lips, relishing it. Manuel had noticed

that he always took a long time over his food and concentrated on the flavor of it. Now Old Matt's coppery, grainy eye squinted at Manuel, as if sizing him up. "We haven't got the tools to make use of what we already know, I'd say."

"Like what?"

"It's too fast for a man. Too big, too. Only servo'd things could stay with it, catch it."

Manuel asked wonderingly, "Use the animals?"

"That's what dogs used to be *for*, boy."

"Do the dogs know that?"

"Somewhere back in the brain they must. Far back, after what we've done to 'em."

"We could train them!"

"Maybe."

"What about The Barron?"

"Maybe."

"Next pruning operation, we'll go out and —"

"If they let me."

"Why wouldn't they? And who's 'they' anyway? You can do what you like. It's a free Settlement."

"I can't keep up the way I used to. The others, they don't like hanging back, waiting for me."

"You can help me train The Barron. That'll do more good than just fast running."

Old Matt smiled. "Sure. Might help."

"Good!"

They worked with the animal in the hills beyond Sidon. The Barron had a lot of the old instinct left, buried deep in the genes, locked into a time-honed arrangement of long chains of enduring carbon and phosphates and hydrogen. It fetched sticks and chased little servo'd imitation rabbits Old Matt made up for it. Manuel found from the old file on The Barron that it had been a bloodhound — a piece of good luck — and within a week he had it baying as it scrambled over rocks and snow after the fleeing cotton-tail rabbit-robo. When it caught the thing it bit down and yelped in surprise at the metal and ceramic, expecting juicy flesh well laced with a prey's adrenalin. It became, through Old Matt's patient training and the boy's energetic urgings, a fleet-footed dart that careered around the hills in a steady, almost automatic lope, scattering rocks as it veered, doggedly — Manuel had to look up the word; it was ancient and long out of use — baying and wailing and claiming dominion over the vacant lands and all the mechanical rabbits they served up to it.

Colonel Lopez viewed this with a distant amusement, until it occurred to him that Bio might like a way to delegate the pruning operations to

animals, especially the servo'd hounds. He did not like the idea. He was glad to find that there were few hounds among the animals, not nearly enough to turn over pruning to them alone. Still, the next year Hiruko mandated that they use The Barron and a few others, in league with men.

Manuel didn't like it. The Barron was his now, his and Old Matt's, in the old sense that dogs belonged forever to the men who trained them, and nobody was going to change that. Hiruko Center had ordered the pruning, this time from cabin seven hundred clicks from Sidon. The boy was grateful to get out again so soon, to spend weeks in the wild beyond the grinding labor of the Settlement. The base camp was much like any of them, crude and hastily thrown up, first as an emergency station a century before and then as an occasional layover spot for prospectors and now finally as a temporary set of rambling shacks barely able to withstand the pressure differential, with wheezing pumps and sparking generator and a fusion tank that shuddered and burped and kept you awake unless you were pretty tired. He was glad of the chance, and doubly glad that The Barron gave Old Matt a new leverage with the other men, who now grumbled to themselves but held their peace when the old man was the last in the column to climb a ridge or finish shucking off his ice-caked leggings. They scared up big flocks of rockjaws and scooters. There were even a fair number of crawlies, still living on the now-vanishing methane in the swollen streams. The crawlie flocks followed the big lumbering fusion caterpillars, sucking up the methane that burbled and effervesced from their exhausts. There were a goodly fraction of mutes among them; and the men laid ambushes for them, waiting in box canyons, knowing the mutes would be the first to run. Evolution had already taught them that they were different, vulnerable, mercilessly tracked and killed — and as always, the hunters credited themselves with a prowess and valor they had not earned in this wasteland, for in the end they were challenging only their own products, their own genetic legacy to the barren moon; there was no deep and natural antagonism between them and the scuttling spawn they had engendered, no fine-honed instincts of hunter and hunted that made even the huge advantage of firearms decisive, as it had once back in an old lost time on Earth.

The boy hung back from this and used The Barron whenever he could. The dog that was buried far down in the mechanical augmentation and intelligence-modification could sense his steady hand, his reassuring voice — deepening now, becoming more nearly a man's — and gave itself over to the pursuit of the mutes, following the old knowledge that came welling up within it. Manuel had gone to Bio, interrogated their compiles, and worked with Old Matt's tutelage, to find the patterns in the foraging of the mutes. From the data came likely sites to find them, clustering-points where the warped and evolving forms met to mate or

feed or be together, for mutual defense or simple dim comradeship. The dogs did well, particularly The Barron. They ran with a taut eagerness and never tired. The old man and the boy, with The Barron and two other servo'd hounds, surprised flocks of mutes in arroyos, streambeds, gorges and water-hollowed caves, killing them with quick hot bolts that cracked in the thin stillness, taking no pleasure in the act of finality but firmly asserting their dominion over what they had made. Manuel tolerated this, learned from it, and bided his time. It was for him training, an exercising for the bigger things which would come in time. He found the new territory far from Sidon no different: vacant and demanding, yielding itself to the same skills he had wrested from the land. He was now as competent as many men in the party. He could track the blurred markings of the flocks, pick up over his micromikes the distant hum and murmur of their feeding, know which calls they made in the mating and which odd *chirrup* or *screee* was that of a mute and not a norm.

He knew too the small scratchings and snow ruts of the Aleph. He would never forget the delta-print, but it was the telltale collection of repeating ruts and scrapes that told more about the movements of the thing. He learned the deep incision it made before lofting itself up onto a sheer rock face, the long skinny wavering trail it left in ice, the splashes of brown where it burned its way through rock, the way it gouged the land in trenches where it feasted on some mineral it wanted. (The moon was acne-pocked with such marks. An old statistical paper he found used the frequency of such scars to judge how long the thing had been mining and scouring the wounded face of Ganymede, and came to a conclusion that was obviously wrong: 3.9 billion years, a number pressing on the very age of the solar system itself, older than Earth's own biosphere. The alien artifacts buried deep in the outer Jovian moons were scarcely a billion years old. Occam's Razor led many to reject his method of dating; the Aleph was too similar to the other artifacts — except for the fact of its movement, its life, its motivating power and response — to dismiss any connection on the basis of a doubtful dating method. Until something could blast a fragment from the Aleph to test its isotopic abundance, its age would remain a conjecture.) It occurred to the boy that the Aleph had known this moon far longer than man had even had a rudimentary self-awareness, and yet had left the land intact all this time, merely taking from the terrain what it needed and letting the ceaseless butting of iceplate tectonics replace and heal the scars, never trying to convert it into something it was not, as men did. Whether this made the Aleph better or worse than mankind was not a question to him; it was the simple immense fact of the difference that mattered. He found the delta mark twice in the new territory, once on a rock wall and again on a crevasse where a scooter had fled. He had assumed now, lacking much true experience, that he would see it only by himself, in some catechism between them. This was

an arrogance of youth. His father, sensing without concretely knowing, saw that the boy would have to go on believing it for a while. He let his son have more slack, allowed him to go out on two- and even three-day treks with the old man and the dogs, sleeping overnight in their suits with a generator lugged along to keep their reserves high, seeking the flocks of mutes in perfunctory fashion but, every man knew, waiting solemnly and without great hope for something more.

It came fleetingly at first. The two of them were resting, panting after a pursuit of scooters across a dry plain, at the funnel mouth of a cañon. Old Matt saw it first, crossing three clicks to the north across a narrow neck of the cañon. It did not ride over the jumble of boulders and jagged ice that jammed the point, but instead tunneled through the tangle as if a straight line was to it no trouble, unmindful of the grinding rasp of immense wrenching that it brought and that ran up the legs of the two even at this remove, a rattling or rock giving way and splintering with a thousand small crackings as the shape passed through. Old Matt had shouted — the boy had not expected that — and they set off, the servo'd dogs speeding ahead, crisscrossing cañons and ravines and arroyos in pursuit, clattering and tumbling down slopes, leaping high over outcroppings of rusty rock, feeling the shuddering slow vibration the Aleph made as it crashed through obstructions, pausing to cut a trench and devour some lode of mineral and then lumbering on, not fast but deliberate, leading the yelping dogs and sweating, panting men as though it knew how to pull them in its wake, always seeking. The other parties were too far away to call in time and the boy did not want to anyway; in fact he was even then sure that with Old Matt present the thing would elude them. He still unconsciously assumed his solitude was necessary, and so was astounded when — as he loped along a ravine — an ice floe exploded with a roar, showering fragments that tumbled glinting in the piercing sun, and the snout of the thing thrust out, turned away from them. He had to tell himself it was not a face — the jagged lines, the sawtoothed mark like a shark's smile — and he saw clearly the holes to aft, a full two meters across. He memorized it this time, ready despite his shock. The dogs surged forward at the first dull splintering of ice and leapt after it. It labored away from them, the shape of it shifting in the mind of the boy and of the old man as well, and Manuel thought, *Big. Too big*, even as he ran flat out after it, drawn forward. It turned. This was recognition that only later struck the boy, but it stopped the dogs dead still for an instant to see the thing grind against shattered ice and swerve, rising. The boy put on a burst of speed and caught up to the dogs, all but The Barron, who had paused only an instant and now, the boy saw, was not going to stop or even slow down. It rushed straight at the thing without plan or true anger, but with ancient instinct, sure of its master behind it, running out of old imperatives born on dusty plains billions of miles



beyond. The boy cut in his augmentation. He ran with aching legs after The Barron's high keening cry, into the face of it — beneath the blocks of glowing alabaster and depthless amber. He rushed under bulky, ridged things like enormous treads.

The Aleph moved. The Barron barked and leaped against a crystalline slab, smacking into it, falling and floundering and rising again, furious but aimless. Manuel felt magnetic fields seize at him. Diffuse forces clutched and tugged, seeming to thicken the air in his chest. He ran after the yelping dog, head low, and the ground wrenched under his feet. Above, a hexagonal pit in the side dilated. In its blue depths he saw movement, deliberate and carrying weight, like huge stones moving inside. It moved. Chunky blocks came smacking down, groaning, sending out forking white ray patterns in the ice under the boy. Cracks tripped him. The hexagonal opening turned abruptly black and squeezed down to fist-sized. He snatched at the dog and caught it, then lost it, then snagged a leg again, and was under the shadow of the thing now as it reared up — smelling, he sensed, of burning brass — towering as he had dreamed and thus familiar, any sound it made lost in the hysterical cries and yelps of the dogs. He closed his eyes and pulled back on The Barron. When he opened them it was . . . gone. It moved in a blur, into a bank of pink snow, Old Matt told him, faster than an eye could follow.

Again the boy thought, *I didn't raise the muzzle of my gun to it*, and this

time he knew why. If he did that it would put him in the same class as the other legions who had gone up against it, generations that had plucked and shot to no effect. The Aleph would think of him that way and, worse, he would, too.

The Barron wailed and struggled against the boy. Old Matt talked to it and after a while the dogs quieted down and they could go on.

"That dog's got everything a dog can have," Old Matt said, "but maybe this needs more than a dog can give. Even a hyped-up dog that can do arithmetic."

He shook his head, and the boy remembered that Old Matt came from a time when animals weren't like this and lived only on Earth, where they had their old roles and were being squashed down into extinction, before the augmentation came along.

Manuel saw then that he had not found the quality that would make these times different, and single him and the dogs out from all the scientists and hunters who had gone before. There was something more needed. The Barron and in fact any dog would need a certain foolish bravery, yes — but more, too; and the boy did not know what that thing was.

*The conclusion of this story will appear in the next issue.*

*Dr. Benford is Professor of physics at the University of California in Irvine. He is the author of Timescape, published by Pocket Books. A hardcover edition of Against Infinity is forthcoming from Simon & Schuster.*

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### **ON WRITING SCIENCE FICTION (The Editors Strike Back!)**

by George Scithers, John M. Ford, & Darrell Schweitzer

"This book is a golden opportunity to see behind the editorial office doors and find out why some stories make it and most others are given printed rejection slips." . . . Tom Staicar in *Amazing SF Stories*

"If you have ambitions toward selling professionally, you ought to have a copy." . . . Don D'Amassa in *SF Chronicle*

This book is available in bookstores or directly from the publisher, Owlswick Press, Box 8243, Philadelphia PA 19101-8243 at \$17.50 (which includes shipping).



Dear George,

The Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) is an organization whose members constitute a majority of those writing and publishing in the field today. Established in 1965, SFWA has championed the rights of authors and allied professionals in the cruel world of publishing.

I am writing to inform those of your readers who have made professional sales that SFWA will gladly send them a brochure describing the services we offer, and the types of membership available. Anyone who thinks they might be qualified should write to SFWA, c/o 68 Countryside Apts., Hacketts-town, New Jersey, 07840.

Stories sold to *Amazing* are certainly credited towards membership in SFWA.

I might also add that people who have yet to make their first professional sale may still subscribe to the *SFWA Bulletin*, the magazine of the Science Fiction Writers of America. The *Bulletin* is filled with useful information for the aspiring writer, including discussions of contracts and publishers, and articles by some of the most renowned of SF authors. Many members subscribed to the *Bulletin* prior to their first sale. I did, and I found it invaluable.

Would-be subscribers should send \$10 (along with name and address) to the above-mentioned address.

Sincerely,

David Brin

Secretary, SFWA

Dear George,

I've put off writing to you about *Amazing* of November '82 for several

reasons, not the least of which has been a severe lack of time. However, today is my day away from the store and I want to make the most of that large chunk of "free" time. Hence, a letter to my favorite-est SF editor!

When I was growing up, I used to read "the pulps" infrequently; and when I did read them, I usually bought *F&SF*. The reasons I didn't buy more frequently include financial — why buy a magazine when I could read library books?; presentation — I had equated pulps with comic books and therefore didn't take them too seriously; quantity/quality of stories — there were too few stories in my child's mind (only five?) and some were so poorly written that there was no sense to be made of them. Those times that I did buy a pulp, I tended toward *F&SF*, although I don't really know why. Perhaps their covers were flashier and less hardware-oriented than anyone else.

Slowly over the years, I began to start buying and reading the pulps for one of the reasons that I'd neglected them as a child: brevity. My reading time was short, and I wanted a quick fix of SF! I most enjoyed those issues of the various magazines that printed few "peripheral" columns (reviews, long editor's statements, fan letters, etc.). After all, I was buying the magazines for the stories, not all that other nonsense. Still, I had no favorite magazine.

In the past several years, I've drifted away again from the pulps in favor of the "hard" science magazines with the exception of one: *Asimov's*. The Editor of that particular magazine seemed to understand my desire for hard science along with SF and didn't carry too

much fantasy. He also presented a satisfying selection of authors to choose from and I often took days to read through the entire magazine, enjoying the blending and weaving of stories. Little did I know who sat in that Editor's chair!

Now comes *Amazing* and I'm pleased and thrilled once more! Dear Lord, who's more hard science than Larry Niven and Jack Williamson? But, adding to *that* is the joy of seeing Silverberg, a personal favorite. Those three gents alone were reason enough to buy *Amazing*. Still, you went that extra step that portends a successful future for *Amazing*: you once again achieved that satisfying blend of stories and authors. Right in there with the three I've mentioned, you stick a John M. Ford and a Gene Wolfe and a Sharon Webb that I particularly liked. In fact, George, the only story I had no patience with was the Nancy Springer. Fantasy and magic is an area I've not acquired a taste for yet and I doubt I shall ever acquire a taste for Springer! I read Wolfe only because he's a skilled writer: otherwise, I'd ignore his writing also.

In fact, dear George, I'm so impressed with *Amazing* that I plan to do something I hesitate to do on a regular basis: I plan to subscribe. My hesitation to subscribe to magazines comes from the uneven quality that I see from issue to issue. I like the freedom of judging the quality of an issue before I buy, testing it before I put my money down. Well, *Amazing* gets my money, if only as thanks for your first issue. However, I've no doubt it will continue to please and that I am beginning a long, pleasant relationship with *Amazing*. To quote the slogan of a local mall: "The thrill is back!" With heartfelt thanks,  
Cadence G.  
Lansdale, PA

*Gee, what can we say (blush), but that we hope you'll like future issues as much?*

*What do the rest of you readers think the balance should be between hard science and fantasy?*

Dear Mr. Scithers:

*Amazing* has changed hands again with all the usual disruption in distribution, changes in editorial policy, etc., and it is once again time to consider why we bother to go the extra mile it takes to be an *Amazing* reader.

*Amazing* has been around a long time (not as long as the Good Doctor for whom you used to work, of course, but a long time nonetheless) and that says something about the quality of *Amazing* over the years when so many imitators of this, the first science-fiction magazine, have come and gone.

In the not so long ago, if you read science fiction you almost certainly read it in a science-fiction magazine. Today, however, most folks get their science fiction from paperback books; and that, unfortunately, sometimes has the effect of limiting the range of our reading.

If most people are like me, when they go to a book store they tend to scan for a particular author or a particular subject area that they have previously enjoyed. We tend to only buy books that we find comfortable. That is, we tend to read only those books whose ideas and themes are already familiar and acceptable to us. On the other hand, when we read *Amazing* we are exposed to a wide range of authors writing in various styles about many subjects from different points of view.

Occasionally, one of my favorite authors does appear in *Amazing* and that is a joy. More often than not, however, the stories are by authors that I have never read. Sometimes these writers

present an idea that had never occurred to me, and that is a treasure. Sometimes these writers present a story supporting a point of view on an issue contrary to the position I have adopted, and that makes me mad at first, but later it also makes me think!

Sure, *Amazing* is entertaining; but it is not just entertainment that makes me a subscriber. *Amazing* can yank me out of my mind set by exposing me to ideas new to me and by forcing me to examine points of view different from those that I have held. At the risk of giving *Amazing* the kiss of death, I must state that I read *Amazing* regularly because it is educational!

Sincerely,  
Joseph M. Shea  
Washington DC

*There's been a long-running debate in science fiction over whether the stories should be educational or not. It's possible to go too far in one direction, and have stories which are little more than thinly-disguised lectures; and in another, and have "entertainment" fiction which is completely vapid and devoid of thought content. (Just like TV!)*

*In our opinion, the presentation of new ideas and viewpoints which stretch the reader's mind is entertainment. It is interesting, the opposite of boring. That is what we want *Amazing* to be.*

Dear George,

Just picked up the November *Amazing* and felt I should drop you a few lines to congratulate you on the improvements you have already made in the magazine. The artwork, typeface, layout, and contents all show a marked change from recent issues.

Frankly, I had given up on *Amazing* back in the mid-1960s when Sol took over and spawned that Godawful string

of reprint mags. At that time I did not think the mag, or *Fantastic*, would last out the decade. But somehow, despite everything, it did. And now I hope to see *Amazing* make some quick strides back into the picture.

I hope sales pick up. I know in recent years I have found it almost impossible to even find the mag on most of the newsstands, unlike *Omni*, which is available everywhere you go. Of course, I don't really consider *Omni* a true SF mag, and I stopped buying it more than a year ago.

Regards,  
Gerry de la Ree  
7 Cedarwood Lane  
Saddle River NJ 07458

Dear Mr. Scithers et al.,

I just read John Ford's gaming column, and would like to add these comments to mine of a few days ago.

I enjoy reviews a lot, not only of books and movies, but fantasy rôle-playing games, which is basically what Ford's column is about. But how about extending *The Incomplete Strategist* to include home video games as well?

I am a writer for *The Logical Gamer*, which covers home video games, and I have always wondered why such weren't the subject of part of a gaming column. Why is this? There are surely as many — if not more — people who play hvg's as fantasy rôle-playing games, and there are certainly an awful lot of science-fiction- and fantasy- related cartridges for all the hvg consoles.

I'd think, also, that because a game manufacturer now owns *Amazing* that you would pursue gaming. Why aren't you?

Best wishes,  
John Betancourt  
Delran NJ

*Comments, anyone?*

Dear Editors of *Amazing*:

I enjoyed your last issue, especially the story *Warflower*. It is not an easy story to forget. I also liked the whole idea behind *The Ultimate Party* by Peter Payack, probably because I have had the honor of finding myself in a position much like the protagonist — fortunately not with *that* many dishes, though.

Thank you for your time and also for the editorial on the problem of creationism — I agree totally with the author. (Personally, I find Tolkien's story of creation in *The Silmarillion* much more interesting . . .)

Sincerely,  
Ms. Denise Habel  
Holy Cross IA

Dear Mr. Scithers:

Yes, I would like to subscribe to *Amazing Stories* very, very much, but only on one condition. I would like my copies to come protected by something. If I can't get my magazines through the mail as I buy them off the stands, then I just don't see the use in subscribing. I would, of course, be willing to pay for this privilege.

Are you going to try to answer all letters that are sent to you? If not, I wish you would say so. Would enclosing a SASE help you to answer? Say so. After all, nobody likes to be ignored. We all *think* you read our letters; but if we don't hear from you, we never really *know*. Nobody likes to write letters to himself. We would all like to get feedback or at least an acknowledgement that you received our letters, if that is possible.

I miss *Fantastic*. Except for the fan-

zines, you don't see many short sword-n-sorcery fiction around anymore. *F&SF* gives the excuse that there is not a lot of good, well-written fiction of that kind around. But can Karl Edward Wagner, Lin Carter, L. Sprague de Camp, Brian Lumley, Dennis More, and Fritz Leiber *all* be bad writers? I think not, and all appeared regularly in *Fantastic*, and we haven't seen anything by them since *Fantastic* failed two years ago.

Sincerely,  
M. Louis Baumgart  
Ortonville MI

*To answer your questions: yes, we certainly read all letters we receive. We try to answer all those which contain a direct question. Very general questions, like "What is the difference between science fiction and fantasy?" or "What makes SF great?" we really can't answer. If you want a reply, it does indeed help to enclose a Self-Addressed, Stamped Envelope, commonly known as a SASE.*

*Of course we print the most interesting letters we get in the letter column. We encourage letters of comment from our readers. Let us hear from you!*

*As for subscription copies, all subscription copies are sent in envelopes. They do not have stickers or labels defacing the covers. This service costs you nothing extra.*

*We miss *Fantastic* too. Its ghost lingers on in a way, since it has been combined with *Amazing* for a couple of years now. For this reason, *Amazing* contains some fantasy of the kind *Fantastic* used to publish. We hope to restart *Fantastic* as a separate publication again, but can't announce any dates now. The one thing you can do to help is support *Amazing*. Once *Amazing* is clearly successful, it will be a lot easier to restart *Fantastic*.*

*We don't think all those writers are*

*bad writers either! We'd like to see stories from some of them. Fritz? Sprague? Dennis?*

Dear Mr. Scithers:

Whether or not you buy anything of mine, one thing I hope you won't change about *Amazing* is the use of stories that are different, thought-provoking, and sometimes experimental in form. Speaking as an SF reader, I think some of the other mags are getting somewhat dull. You'll probably have to read through a lot more crap to get to the good stuff; experiments — even (\*sigh\* usually) mine — don't always turn out positive, but it should be worth it.

So, anyhow, good luck in your new position, and good reading.

Sincerely,

Robert H. Brown

*We certainly agree with you that a magazine that isn't thought-provoking and that doesn't in some way attempt to stretch the boundaries of the field will get mighty dull mighty fast. You might say that we're looking for innovative fiction,*

*an innovation being defined as a change in technique which enables the writer to communicate more and do it more clearly. We are not interested in arty technique for its own sake, as was often the case among the lesser of the "New Wave" writers in the 1960s. Some stories we would consider innovative include Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination*, Thomas M. Disch's "The Squirrel Cage," Samuel Delany's *The Einstein Intersection*, many of the stories of Jorge Luis Borges, and — for that matter — "Some Are Born Great" by J.A. Lawrence, which will be appearing soon in the pages of *Amazing*.*

*I guess you could sum it up like this: sure, experiments are the lifeblood of any field of literature. We want to publish the successes.*

*Readers, another point. We are a little uneasy about publishing the addresses of our correspondents. If you want your address published, include it at the end of your letter, or otherwise indicate that you want it published. If so, then we will. If not, not.*

*See you next issue!*

*The Editor*



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Yes, we are looking for stories from people who have never sold a story before, as well as from established writers. To help you with manuscript format, cover letters, and the other details of sending in a story, and to give you some of our ideas on Plot, Background, and Characterization, we've prepared an 11,000-word booklet, *Constructing Scientific Fictional & Fantastic Stories*. You may obtain a copy by writing to AMAZING™ SF Stories, P.O. Box 110, Lake Geneva WI 53147; be sure to include your address and zip code. Since these cost us about \$1.00 each to send out, we'd appreciate receiving this amount (check or money order, please), but if you simply cannot afford this at the moment, we'll send you one free rather than have you do without. (Bulk orders are much less expensive per copy; ask for details.)

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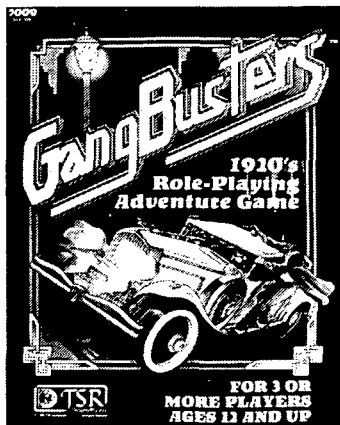
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